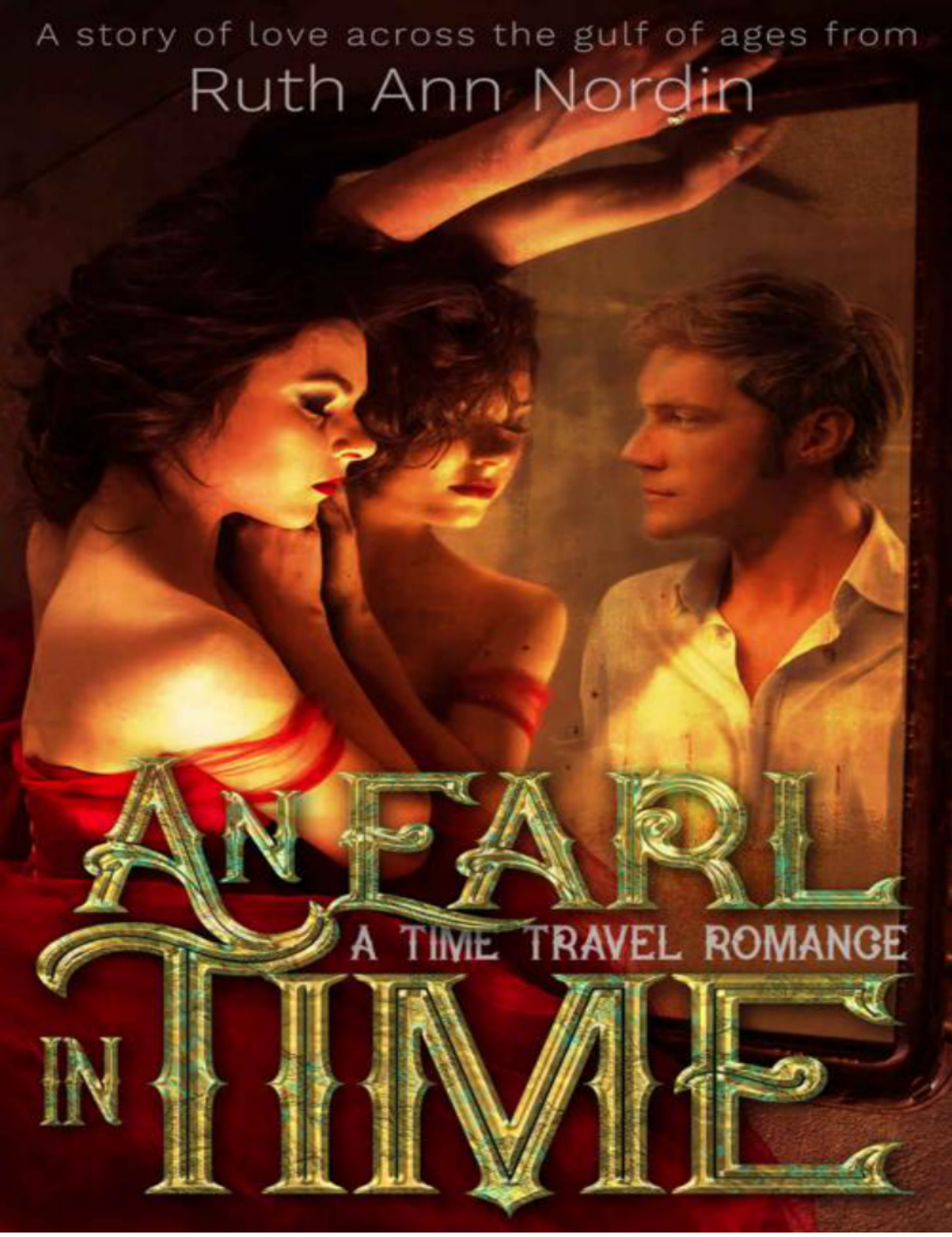
A story of love across the gulf of ages from

Ruth Ann Nordin



An Earl in Time

A Time Travel Romance

A Fairytale Regency Romance

An Earl In Time

Ruth Ann Nordin

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To Stephannie Beman, one of the best people I've had the fortune of meeting. My life has been so much better because of you. I'm grateful to call you my friend.

Dear Gentle Reader,

Welcome to my very first fairytale romance. My intention was to write a time travel romance with a gothic feel to it, but somewhere along the way, the story incorporated elements in it that involved a curse and magic. The focus is still on the romance, but this story is a slower build than what I typically do. I wanted to spend sufficient time in setting the stage for the events that will later transpire in the book. As a result, this book is about twice as long as the other romances I typically write.

If you prefer fairy tales that are light and fluffy, this isn't the book for you. I have incorporated darker themes in this book. This book follows the Grimm fairytale path. It's not based off of any familiar fairy tales in modern times. I set out to do something new, but I did do research in different folklore regarding fairies to help get inspiration for how the magical elements should work in this book. As two author friends told me, make sure magic has some rules.

This book is primarily about two people finding each other across the gulf of two centuries and falling in love. This is a romance, and since it's a romance, there is a happy ending where true love conquers all.

If this sounds like your kind of book, I welcome you to my dark and romantic world.

Happy reading,
Ruth Ann Nordin

Chapter One

Present Day
June
English Countryside

Willow Knudson peered out the car window as the lawyer drove down the tree-lined path.

"It's not far now," the lawyer told her. "We'll be at Nightingale Hall in a few minutes."

She looked up at the tree branches that formed a canopy high above them. Whoever had planted all of the trees lining both sides of the road had been meticulous about it. The trees lined almost an entire mile of the road, and they were equally spaced one from the other.

They provided more than enough shade for a traveler on a sunny day. It was ironic that the day should be so bright when it was a death that had brought her here. It was a shame she hadn't known anything about the long distant cousin who left her an entire estate.

"Up ahead is a moat," the lawyer said as they approached the end of the trees. "There's still water in it."

She glanced at Mr. Thompson. She probably should think of him by his first name. She was twenty-five. It wasn't like she was a child. But he was significantly older than her. He could be her grandfather's age. And that made her think of him as Mr. Thompson rather than Arnold Thompson.

Mr. Thompson smiled at her. "I don't think you'll be prepared for what you're about to see. You said you live in a flat in the United States?"

"A flat?"

He paused. "I bet you call it an apartment over there."

What a strange word for *apartment*. Keeping the thought to herself, she said, "Yes, I live in an apartment."

"Once you see Nightingale Hall, you might not want to sell it. It's a lot different than an apartment." He pointed up ahead. "There's the bridge that will take us over the moat."

She turned her gaze to it. The stone bridge curved upward. Sure enough, it was over a moat. She'd only seen a moat in the movies. She tried to make out where the moat ended, but it seemed to go on forever.

"How long is the moat?" she asked.

"It goes in a complete circle. If I remember right, the realtor said it surrounds 120 acres."

She blinked in surprise. "Why would anyone make such a long

moat?"

"Who knows? The noble classes seem to do everything to excess. I've seen estates that have acres and acres of gardens and pathways. If nothing else, it keeps the gardeners employed."

Yes, she was sure it did. She turned her gaze back to the moat as they started to cross the bridge. She thought she saw the water give off a glow of purples and pinks. She blinked and studied the water again. Sure enough, she did see those colors, and they seemed to pulse and swirl in the water.

"How did the gardener create that effect with the pink and purple colors?" she asked Mr. Thompson.

He glanced at the moat. "I don't see anything pink or purple in there."

He didn't? She studied the water again and saw it. Maybe it wasn't on his side of the bridge. She leaned behind his seat and looked out the window. It wasn't as easy to see from this angle, but she could still see the colors. Maybe he was colorblind.

She settled back into her seat and grabbed the will before it fell off of her lap.

Once they were over the bridge, he drove up the road that wound its way through some shrubbery that was taller than the car. It, much like the trees, lined the car on both sides. This was turning out to be a much bigger place than she'd expected when Mr. Thompson told her he was taking her to the quaint English countryside. The word "quaint" made her assume they were going to a cozy little cottage outside of a major city. She had expected a rural setting, but this was far more elaborate than anything she had imagined.

As they wound around the last of the shrubs, an enormous two-story structure made of stone came into view. Her mouth almost fell open. It was huge.

"This isn't a house. This is a mansion," she blurted out.

"I was going to describe it to you, but since you're not familiar with English estates, I didn't know how to. It's a Georgian manor built in the mid-1600s. It has sixteen bedrooms, six baths, and plenty of other rooms you can use however you wish. It could use a full-time occupant. Even though all of the updates have been done to it, no one has lived here for longer than a few months at a time."

She glanced at her distant relative's name on the will. "You mean, Greg Westmore didn't live here?"

"No, he had no interest in the place. In fact, it hasn't been inhabited full time since 1817. It's worth twelve million pounds. I'm not sure what that is in American dollars."

She didn't, either, but she was sure it was a lot. "Didn't Greg or any of his ancestors want to sell it for the money?" Why would anyone

let this mansion just sit vacant for all of these years?

"Greg told me he wasn't able to sell it, no matter how many times he tried. He said the place wanted to stay with the rightful heirs."

She stared at him in surprise.

He offered a shrug. "I'm sorry. I don't know any more than that."

"So does that mean I can't sell it, either?"

"He would tell you that you can't, but how can that be true? I don't see how a property can stop the owner from selling it. I think he had an emotional attachment to it. You'd be amazed at how emotions make people do things they otherwise wouldn't do."

He drove up to the wide stone steps that led to the large two doors that marked the entrance of the ginormous house. She saw a purple van not too far from them.

"I took the liberty of using some of the money from the estate to hire a couple of people to get the place ready for you," Mr. Thompson said. "There's a small amount that's been set aside for each generation to maintain things around here. That amount gets invested, and it's enough to keep things going here. If you choose to stay here, you won't have to worry about the upkeep. Though, since no one currently occupies the place, all of the furniture is covered in order to preserve it."

"The place is furnished?" She had assumed it didn't have furnishings since no one lived here.

He nodded. "It still has the furniture from when Julian Azazel, the Earl of Blackwell, assumed ownership of the estate." He turned off the car and smiled in a wistful way. "Maybe I'm getting nostalgic in my old age, but I think it's rather nice everything has been preserved. In some ways, it's as if this estate is untouched by time."

Now Willow was intrigued. She'd never seen vintage furnishing before. This might be a treat.

She got out of the car but waited for Mr. Thompson to lead the way before she went to the front door. As soon as she walked into the large foyer, she saw a woman who was wiping down the banister of the wide wooden staircase that had recently been cleaned. She was an attractive slender blonde who looked to be in her mid-forties.

When the woman noticed them, she put the rag into the bucket and went over to them. "Are you the new owner?" she asked Willow.

Willow nodded, but it was Mr. Thompson who spoke. "Yes, this is Willow Knudson. Willow, this is Violet. She is in charge of the staff who periodically comes out to maintain the place."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Violet said, extending her hand.

Willow shook it, and as she did, she noticed the little tattoo on the woman's wrist. It was a blend of one violet and one rose. "What a pretty tattoo," Willow said as she studied it.

“Thank you,” the woman replied with a friendly smile. “I decided to get it to go with my name.”

“I like it,” Willow said, returning her smile.

Violet let go of Willow’s hand then said, “We’re almost done cleaning everything. We’ll be out of your hair soon.”

“Everything looks great,” Willow replied as she scanned the area. “It’s hard to believe no one has lived here for centuries.”

“That’s because Violet and her team do a good job,” Mr. Thompson said. “Before we get into the details of what owning this estate will mean for you, I want to show you around. Maybe you’ll want to leave America and live here.”

Live here? Willow had only learned this place existed. She couldn’t even think about living here. So much was happening so fast. It was hard to believe that just last week she was sitting in her apartment reading a book after coming home from her nine-to-five job that paid just enough to cover her bills. Her parents had never mentioned a distant relative in the UK.

“I took the liberty of having the kitchen fully stocked for you,” Mr. Thompson added. “I figured since you have nowhere to stay in England, you might as well live here while you decide what to do with the place.”

“I might as well sell it,” Willow said. Greg might have had an emotional attachment to this place, but she didn’t. “My life is in America. I told my boss I would be back in two weeks.”

Mr. Thompson nodded. “Well, you have more than enough to eat for two weeks. When I return to the office, I’ll write up the contract for you to sell this place. For now, I’ll show you around.”

“I’ll return to cleaning,” Violet spoke up. Turning to Willow, she added, “If you see anything I missed, let me know.”

Willow nodded then followed Mr. Thompson up the stairs.

As he showed her the very large and very luxurious bedrooms on the top floor, she felt like she was looking through a museum. The furniture was covered with heavy sheets that might have been white at one time but were now yellow. The windows were practically as big as the walls. They stretched for a good eight feet, and they were covered in heavy drapes that were pulled back to allow sunlight to come in.

“Violet took the liberty of selecting one of these bedrooms for you to sleep in,” Mr. Thompson told her as they approached one of the bedrooms toward the end of the long hallway. “She had the sheets removed and everything made up for you.”

Willow stepped into the room and inwardly gasped when she saw just how splendid a bedroom in this place was when the coverings were removed. There had been tall posts on the canopied beds in the

other bedrooms, but this one had purple drapes hanging around the dark reddish-brown posts that almost reached the ceiling. The pillowcases, sheets, and comforter were purple, too. At the end of the bed was what Mr. Thompson called a settee.

The room also had a fireplace, a couple of chairs, a small desk, a couple of lamps, a vanity, and a large armoire.

"Through here is the bathroom," Mr. Thompson said as he went off to the side of the room.

She followed him and saw that the bathroom had a shower on one side and a bathtub on the other. There were also two sinks, modern lighting, and modern tile on the floor. It was a startling contrast to the bedroom which looked as if it belonged in the past, minus the lamps. She noticed the pile of neatly folded towels resting on the counter.

"Everything in here works," Mr. Thompson said. "Violet had the plumber make sure everything is up to code. And," he added, "you'll be happy to know there is a laundry room on the first floor, so you won't have to wash anything by hand."

She smiled at the teasing tone in his voice. It would be nice to have access to a washer and dryer that she didn't have to share with a bunch of other people in her apartment building, even if it was just for two weeks.

They left the bathroom, and that was when she noticed the door that was close to the vanity. "Is this a closet?" she asked as she went to it. She tried to open it, but it was locked.

"That's actually the door that connects to the other bedroom," Mr. Thompson said. "It's been sealed shut. You can access that bedroom from the door in the hallway. I can show it to you. It's the last room on this floor."

She left the room, and he took her to the last bedroom in the hallway. The hallway ended at a wall that had a sheet covering a long vertical flat object. Since no sunlight was peeking through the sheet, she knew the object behind it couldn't be a window.

Mr. Thompson opened the bedroom door, and she turned away from the object. She peered into the bedroom and saw that it was all covered up with sheets, just as the other bedrooms had been.

"The fact that everything has been so well preserved will be a good selling point," Mr. Thompson told her.

He was probably right. If she was a history buff, she would absolutely love this place.

She followed him back down the hall, and this time she noticed the paintings on the walls. They all looked as if they had been recently dusted, as did the small table with a lamp on it. She did wonder, however, why a sheet was still covering that object at the end of the hall. Perhaps Violet hadn't noticed that one.

“That’s it for the upstairs,” Mr. Thompson said, bringing Willow’s attention back to him. “We’ll go back down the main stairs. There are other stairs up here, but those have been boarded up. Servants used to go up and down them. If the new owner wants, they can always open those stairwells back up.”

He took her back down the stairs, and it looked as if Violet had finished cleaning the bannister since Willow didn’t see her.

“We did have the sheets removed from the furnishings in the sitting room,” Mr. Thompson said as he took her down a hallway. “Back in the 1800s, it would have been called a drawing room.”

Willow didn’t even know what a drawing room was, but when she saw it was a room with chairs, a settee, a desk, and a fireplace, she realized it was a living room.

“All of the furniture here is mahogany, and back then, it was crafted by hand instead of machine. I don’t care what people say; this kind of craftsmanship will always be superior to anything a machine can do.”

As he continued to tell her about the furniture, her attention went to the portrait on the wall behind the huge desk. It was of a man who was probably in his early twenties. He was standing with his hand on the back of an empty chair. On closer inspection, she realized he was leaning toward the chair. It could be supporting him. She could only guess how many hours he had to stand for the artist to paint him. He was dressed in vintage clothes. Well, they were vintage in her time. No one dressed like that anymore unless they were actors in a movie that took place in the past.

She had no way of judging what color eyes he had, but he had dark-blond hair and nice broad shoulders. He was slender, too. The tall boots he wore gave her the impression he was tall, but boots had a tendency to do that regardless of who wore them.

“That’s Julian Azazel, the Earl of Blackwell,” Mr. Thompson told her. “He was the last person to inhabit this manor for longer than a few months at a time. He came here from London after his father died. He was supposed to be here for a month to set things in order, but after two months, his relatives and friends noticed he hadn’t returned to London. When his cousin came to check on him, he said the entire place was empty.”

“Empty?”

“The furniture was all here, as you see it now, but there was no person anywhere on the property.”

She didn’t scare easily, but she had to admit this was a bit spooky. “They didn’t find a single person?”

He shook his head. “It was as if everyone disappeared. Or, at least, that’s what the cousin said.”

“Do you think the cousin lied?”

“I don’t know. Rumor has it that someone in the household went mad and killed everyone, buried all the bodies, and went off to either hide or die somewhere. Then there are those who say something happened that made everyone flee from here.” He paused. “The most likely story is that his cousin wanted the title for himself and killed Lord Blackwell in secret. Then he either ordered all of the servants to leave or killed them, too. Though the cousin insisted he was innocent, the judge found him guilty of murder and had him hanged. If I remember right, the cousin’s name was Francis. The title then went to Francis’ younger brother. That was Phillip. He managed the estate until he died. And on and on down the line the estate went from one heir to another. You are now the last remaining heir of the estate.”

She glanced at the portrait. She supposed the only people who knew exactly what happened was the man in the portrait and the servants who’d been here with him.

“Nothing bad has happened here since then,” Mr. Thompson assured her. “People have been here on and off through the years, and they’ve all been fine. Everyone who inherited the place has lived a long and healthy life. Whatever happened, it was restricted to that particular incident. I don’t want you to get scared.”

“I’m not scared,” she said. “It’s all in the past. Like Jack the Ripper, we’ll probably never know what actually happened.”

He didn’t hide his relief. “I didn’t want you to think ghosts were roaming the halls or anything.”

She chuckled. “I don’t believe in ghosts. I’m fine with staying here while we work on a plan to sell this estate.”

“Good. I’ll show you the rest of the rooms, and then we’ll discuss the terms of the contract.”

With another glance at the portrait, she followed Mr. Thompson out of the room.

Chapter Two

It was strange to have a whole mansion all to herself, but by the end of the day, everyone had left. Willow had fish and a salad on the veranda so she could eat her dinner while looking out at the pretty landscape. While she was here, she might as well take the time to enjoy it. Living in the city didn't provide scenic views like this.

One thing she was going to have to do when she returned home was figure out what she would do with the money she received from the sale of this estate. Mr. Thompson had suggested she leave it in the bank and seek out the help of a financial adviser. The more she thought about it, the better that option seemed. Coming into so much money at once did produce a wave of anxiety that surprised her. She never expected to be rich. She'd heard of people winning the lottery and ending up broke in a few years. She didn't want that to happen to her. She wanted this money to last her for the rest of her life, and it would be good if she had something to pass to her children, if she ever had them. At the moment, she didn't even have a boyfriend. Heck, she wasn't even dating.

After dinner, she took a long shower. Then she retrieved a book she'd started on the airplane and curled up in bed to read it.

The next day, she took a walk outside. Mr. Thompson had told her there was an older car in the garage. Curious, she went to see it. The car turned out to be a Vauxhall Cresta, and it looked like something that came right out of the 1960s. It was hard to believe people had once driven things so big. It was more like a boat than a car.

Mr. Thompson had said one of Violet's workers checked on it to make sure it would run without any problems, but really, there was only one way to find out if an old relic like this would still run.

Willow took the key from her jeans' pocket and unlocked the door. She sat on the bench leather seat. It was weird to sit on the right side instead of the left like she did in the US. She'd probably get used to it if she stayed here, but since she had no such desire, she decided not to drive it. Instead, she turned the key in the ignition to see if it would start. The engine purred instantly. Her eyes widened in surprise. It seemed that Violet and her team were just as good at maintaining things as Mr. Thompson claimed.

She turned the engine off, got out of the car, and took a walk along the newly mowed lawn. On her way, she saw stables that had once been used but were now empty. In the distance, she saw trees on the backside of the property. Most were scattered out, but there was a group of thirty or forty of them that were all bunched up together. How odd. One would think with all of this space, there would be no reason for trees to be pressed up against each other.

She didn't go to the stables or the trees. She opted to stay close to the manor, and as she continued her walk, she came across a gazebo.

How quaint!

She hurried over to it. It had been freshly painted with a charming purple color. The area right around it had been cleared of weeds. She touched the side of the gazebo to make sure the paint was dry before she stepped into it. She'd always thought these things were pretty, but she'd never been in one before.

From here, she could see the driveway that led to the tall shrubs. Beyond that, she could see the bridge that went over the moat. It was small in the distance, but she could see it all the same. And beyond that, she could make out the trees that lined the road that led to the main highway. She couldn't, however, see the highway or any other mansion from here. It really was just her all the way out here in the middle of nowhere.

She involuntarily shivered. She wouldn't want to be out here all by herself for any longer than a couple of weeks. She imagined that such a situation would end up driving her crazy.

When she grew bored, she got up from the bench and returned to the enormous house. What was it Mr. Thompson had called it? Nightingale Hall? Looking back, she should have realized something called Nightingale Hall wasn't going to be a cute little country home. That just showed her how little she knew about English nobility and their residences.

She entered through the side entrance that was by the kitchen. After she had a quick snack, she searched through the rooms on the first floor to see if there was a TV or a computer anywhere. She didn't remember seeing one yesterday, but there was so much going on that she only remembered parts of everything that had happened.

The sitting room was the only room where the coverings had been removed from the furniture. Out of curiosity, she lifted some of the sheets from the items in the other rooms. The furniture was just like what was in the sitting room. Plush seats with mahogany frames. One of the rooms had sheets that were draped along two walls. She lifted one and saw a fireplace. She lifted another and saw a bookcase filled with hardbound books.

She picked out one of the books. Though the previous owners had done as much as possible to preserve it, the pages were stiff and yellow from the passage of time. She read the title page and saw that it was called *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* by Henry Fielding. She'd never heard of this particular story before. If it was a story. For all she knew, it was a biography about someone named Tom Jones. She looked at the year it was published. 1749. People back in 1749 didn't read fiction, did they? She thought for a moment and realized

that of course, they did. William Shakespeare lived in the 1500s. She couldn't believe she actually recalled that from her high school English class.

She put the book back on the shelf and pulled out another one. She opened it and read *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. She'd never heard of this book before, either. It might be a description of an entire castle, for all she knew. There were enough pages in it to make her think such a thing was possible. One could write an entire book about this place.

She put it back on the shelf. She knew it was stupid to base the desire to read a book on the cover, but all of the covers were plain, and that made her think these books had to be just as boring as they looked.

She stepped away from the bookshelf and let the sheet fall back into place. She went to the large object that was close to a large window and lifted the sheet. It was a desk. There was even an inkwell and quill on it. She was surprised to see there was no paper to go with it. Adding a few pieces of paper would make it seem more like someone had just stepped away from the desk for a few minutes. That would also give this entire place a little "extra" to the old time appeal it had.

She set the sheet back in place and left the room. She didn't see a TV or computer anywhere. So there was no chance of her watching any TV shows, movies, or videos. She supposed if no one lived here for any length of time, there was no point in setting up a satellite system or an internet connection.

At least they'd thought to put in electric lines, an air conditioner, and plumbing. Things could be worse. She might grow bored out here, but she'd be comfortable. She could always take the car out and go to the small town she had passed on her way to this estate if she got desperate for something to do.

In the meantime, she had her iPhone to keep her occupied. Recalling that she'd left it on her suitcase, she hurried up the large set of stairs and went to her bedroom. She'd been so tired yesterday that she hadn't bothered to go online. All she'd done was check to see if anyone had called. Not that she expected anyone to, but it was a habit.

She pushed the button at the bottom of the screen on her phone. Nothing.

She frowned. She must have forgotten to charge it before she left the hotel yesterday. With a groan, she went to her suitcase and dug through it until she found her cord. She plugged the cord into the wall and hooked it to the phone. The screen told her it was charging.

Thankfully, she'd brought several books along. And these had

attractive covers on them that made someone want to read them.

Once she selected the one she wanted, she left her bedroom. Her gaze went to the sheet hanging on the wall at the end of the hallway. She never did see what was behind that sheet.

She went over to it and lifted it. Her reflection stared back at her. It was a mirror. A very tall mirror. The thing started a couple of feet above her head and went all the way down to her ankles. Whoever put the thing here probably liked to look at their entire outfit. She'd once had a mirror like that, though it hadn't been so high above her head.

Something flickered in the mirror. She took a better look at the area of the hall where she thought she noticed the flicker, but nothing unusual popped out at her.

Her attention went to her reflection, and she realized the wind had messed up her hair. She let the sheet fall back down and returned to the bedroom. Even if she had nowhere to go, she couldn't let her hair be all over the place like this.

She went to the bathroom and brushed her hair. Feeling much better, she took the book and went down to the sitting room.

As Willow read the book in the sitting room, her gaze kept going to the portrait on the wall. She didn't know why her attention was continually drawn to it. Maybe it was because this was a far-off distant ancestor in her family tree. Even if she wasn't a direct descendant from his line, she was in the place he had once owned.

She had no idea how Mr. Thompson was able to track her down from the family line. She'd never dealt with such things before. How did people know which person got an estate? Mr. Thompson had said something about titles, but that was harder for her to grasp than obtaining this estate. Things were so much simpler in America. No one was a duke or earl…or…or…whatever.

Her dad died when she was a child, so she had no frame of reference to go by there. But she did have a lawyer help her after her mom's death. She'd been an only child. The lawyer had told her that made things easier. Also, her mom hadn't owned the house she'd lived in. She'd been renting it. All Willow really had to do was figure out what to do with her mom's things. She'd kept some of it, but she'd given everything else away.

Willow scanned the room. An estate like this was a lot more complicated than what she'd gone through before. She didn't have the money to run an extravagant place like this, and from what Mr. Thompson said, there wasn't enough money left in the estate to

maintain it for more than ten years. Selling it and going back to America made the most sense. She wasn't about to marry some rich snob elitist just to hold onto it. She'd rather be single for the rest of her life and live in a small apartment.

She hoped there would be a buyer for this place. It was charming in its own right. She would like to see it thrive under the care of people who could afford to take care of it. The people just had to be someone other than her.

Again, her gaze went to the portrait. She wondered what Lord Blackwell would think if he knew the estate he once owned was going to be sold to someone outside of the family tree. She was sure it wasn't something he'd like. He had once walked through the halls of this mansion. At one time, he'd even been in this very room. For all she knew, he could have sat on this very chair.

The thought made her shiver. She got up and went to the settee. He probably sat on this piece of furniture, too. He could have sat here while entertaining a guest. Given how much the thing reminded her of a loveseat, he might have even shared this with a romantic interest.

It was a shame he'd been killed. Actually, everyone who'd been living here had been killed. Brutally murdered by the cousin, for who knew what reason. Or, at least, that was what the rumors were. She wasn't prone to superstition, but it was definitely creepy that he and the servants all went missing.

If the cousin had been telling the truth, then they were all gone when he came out here all those years ago. The place would have been a lot like this. Empty of people. The furniture all in pristine condition. She would have freaked out if she had come here expecting a bunch of servants and the earl of the place but found it like this. Coming here, she knew she was going to spend a couple of weeks alone. So the lack of people didn't spook her.

It was depressing to think over, though. In an attempt to brighten her mood, she turned her attention back to the book. It was a cute comedy, and it was the best way to end the day before she had something to eat and went to bed for the night.

But, for some reason, she couldn't take her mind off of Lord Blackwell. Only he and the servants knew what had really happened. And dead men told no tales.

It was so strange that no one found any bodies. She didn't know how many servants would have been working here, but it was hard to believe there were no bodies anywhere. Sure, someone could poison people and haul their bodies out to bury them, but wouldn't someone have noticed the freshly dug graves? Or wouldn't the killer have gotten careless and left some clue behind? Surely, there would have been some indication that a bunch of people had been murdered.

Maybe they all ran off in the middle of the night. No, that didn't make sense, either. This estate was huge. There wasn't anyone else around for miles. She didn't know if the horses were still here when the cousin came to check on Lord Blackwell, but would there be enough horses to take everyone away from here? And if so, someone would have come across at least one person who'd been living here at some point.

The little she knew didn't make sense. Mr. Thompson had told her there were rumors. Rumors went around when no one could pinpoint the truth. This was in the time period where they didn't have cameras or iPhones. There wasn't any forensic evidence for police to wade through. The technology to figure out this puzzle hadn't been developed yet. So really, no one was ever going to know the truth. And that meant, it was pointless for her to even think about it. She'd be much better off getting lost in her book.

Except she couldn't. No matter how hard she tried, her attention kept going to the portrait. With a sigh, she put the bookmark between the pages of the book, closed it, and went to get something to eat.

Chapter Three

Two days later, Willow decided to take the car into town. Her attempts at getting her iPhone to charge had failed. She needed to get a new cord. There had to be a store somewhere that sold them. She knew her iPhone was fine. She had used it to call Mr. Thompson from the hotel. So, it had to be the cord. Besides, it seemed like she was always buying cords for the thing. She didn't know why companies couldn't make better cords.

She gathered her iPhone and slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans. Then she got her purse and keys and headed for the garage. The day was overcast. She hoped it wouldn't rain until she got back.

Once in the car, she started it up and backed out of the garage. Thank goodness she had learned to drive using a stick shift car. Otherwise, she would have been stranded here. It was intimidating enough to be in what was considered the passenger seat in the United States. She only hoped she would remember to drive on the correct side of the road.

She put the car into first gear. Well, here went nothing. She lifted her foot gently off the clutch and used her other foot to push on the accelerator. The car lurched forward, but she managed to drive forward. It'd been years since she'd driven a stick. Now she remembered why she was happy to get an automatic. It was much nicer to not have to worry about the balance between handling the clutch and the accelerator.

She drove down the long driveway. She made her way past the tall shrubs. But when she got to the bridge, the car stopped running. Maybe the thing wasn't in as good condition as she thought. She tried to turn the engine. Nothing. Not even a click.

She leaned back in the seat and sighed. Well, this hadn't gone as planned. But she was better off with the car dying here on the property than she was with it dying in town.

Since she didn't relish the idea of walking all the way back to the mansion, she tried to start the car a second time. Again, nothing. After a moment, she tried it a third time with the same result.

She glanced back at the tall shrubs that hid the house. That would *really* be a long way to walk. She should give the car at least one more try. She put the stick into the rear gear slot and tried to start the car. This time it started.

"That's weird."

She hadn't actually expected it to start.

She bit her lower lip. Would it be wise to try to go forward and cross the bridge, or would she be better off returning to the house?

A raindrop fell from the sky.

Well, that settled it. She wasn't going to take the risk of getting stranded out in the rain.

She backed up and turned the car so that it was facing the shrubs. Unsure of whether it would make the car die again, she shifted into first gear.

The car's engine still hummed.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you didn't want to leave the estate," she told the car.

She drove the car back to the garage and parked it. She got into the mansion just as the rain started to come down in earnest.

Willow stared out the window in the sitting room as the rain poured down. It had rained all through the night, and this morning, she didn't see any indication that it was going to stop.

She pulled the blanket she'd found in her bedroom closer around her shoulders and sank back into a comfortable position on the settee. It was a good thing she was short because if she'd been tall, there was no way she could have been comfortable here. She adjusted the pillow under her head and focused on the book she was holding. This time she'd chosen something darker. It wasn't a horror novel, but it had some eerie elements in it. She figured it was fitting, given the rain outside.

Unwittingly, her gaze went to the portrait. She knew Lord Blackwell wasn't in the thing, but at times, it did seem like he was staring down at her.

"It's too bad you're not still alive," she said. "You're kind of cute." Then, with a chuckle, she let her gaze fall back to the page she was on.

Thankfully, Mr. Thompson would be by tomorrow to go over the contract for selling this place. Maybe she could get him to take her to town to get the cord for her iPhone. She was starting to grow restless without any connection to the outside world.

She was able to get lost in the book, and two hours passed before she decided to cook a meal. She ate in the kitchen by the window so she could look out at the rainy fields. She could see the stables from here. She wondered what it must have looked like all those years ago when horses were the main way people got around. Though she did her best to imagine it, she couldn't picture it. She hadn't seen enough movies about the Regency or Victorian era to get a suitable idea of how things were back then.

The most notable thing about being here was the silence. Since she

wasn't able to use her iPhone and there was no TV or radio, the only noises she ever heard were the ones she made. That was one good thing about the rain. The pitter-patter of drops hitting the mansion gave her something to listen to.

After she put the dishes in the dishwasher and started it, she went to her bedroom and took a long, hot shower. It was a good thing she'd brought plenty of books to read. If she hadn't, she might go crazy here. She wasn't an extrovert, but she was beginning to miss other people.

Mr. Thompson would be here tomorrow. Then she could get a cord for the iPhone, and she'd be connected with the world again. After that, she'd be here only for a few more days. Mr. Thompson had assured her that she wouldn't miss her flight back to the US.

She stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself. She turned on the lamps in the room, picked up the book she'd been reading, and sat on the settee at the foot of the bed. She was dry by the time she finished the book.

After she put the book back in her suitcase, she got dressed into her pajamas and brushed her hair. Then she put her hair into a ponytail. She went to the clock above the fireplace mantle. It was amazing it still worked after all this time. It was only 7:48. It was too early to go to sleep.

She glanced out the window. The rain had finally let up, but the clouds still made it darker than it should be this time of evening. She didn't know if she should start another book or wait until tomorrow. While it was early *and* she was bored, if she ended up getting caught up in the story, she wasn't going to be able to sleep well until after midnight. Mr. Thompson had said he was going to be here around nine. She'd like to have enough time to eat and get ready before he came.

With a sigh, she put on her slippers and peered out of the bedroom. The hall was darker than she'd expected it to be, but she could see her way just fine. She could go downstairs and do some more exploring and then come back up here when she grew tired.

Decision made, she stepped into the hallway. Something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. Her gaze went to the mirror that was covered with the sheet. She stared at it for a long moment, wondering what had gotten her attention.

Maybe she should just yank the sheet off of it. She didn't know why it mattered if the mirror was covered or not. Though she'd made an effort to ignore it, the fact that a sheet concealed the mirror made her think something weird was behind it.

She rolled her eyes. Reading the spooky story didn't help. All it did was encourage her imagination to run wild.

That settled it. The best thing she could do was take the sheet down. She could always pin it back up when she left.

She went back into the bedroom and retrieved the chair that was in front of the vanity. She set it in front of the mirror and stepped on it. She searched along the edges of the sheet for the pins that were holding it in place.

Weird. There didn't seem to be anything. The dimness in the hallway didn't help. She felt along the wall just above the mirror. If she was smart, she'd wait and do this tomorrow morning when the sun would give her all the light she needed.

Just as she was ready to give up, her fingers brushed a nail. She had to use her fingernails to pry it from the wall, but it worked. It turned out there were two nails holding the sheet in place. Years and years of them being here had turned the metal into a dark purple shade.

She took the sheet and brought it down with her as she stepped onto the floor. She glanced at the mirror and saw her reflection staring back at her. Already, she felt better. Taking the thing down was going to save her imagination from going in all sorts of horrible directions.

She folded the sheet and picked up the chair. She set the chair in front of the vanity then placed the sheet on the chair. She intended to put the nails on top of the folded sheet, but they were no longer in her hand.

Her gaze swept the floor. She didn't see the nails there. She stepped into the hall and squinted in the dim light. She bent down and slowly walked back to the mirror, studying the floor as she did so. But she didn't see the two nails anywhere.

She thought she'd had a secure grip on them. She didn't know where she'd dropped them. Certainly, they had to be somewhere. Things just didn't disappear.

When she reached the mirror, a light flickered at her. Her head snapped up. There was a flickering light coming from one of the bedrooms. She gasped and turned back to look at the bedrooms behind her. There was light coming from her bedroom, but it wasn't flickering.

She struggled to come up with a logical reason as to why a light should be flickering in the mirror. It could be a trick of the eyes, she supposed. Maybe some discrepancy in the glass was making the light appear to be flickering. It was an old mirror.

She looked back into the mirror and focused on which bedroom the flickering light was coming from. Eyebrows furrowed, she counted the doorways until she found the right one. Then she turned to the hall behind her and counted those doors.

Her eyes grew wide. The light in the mirror wasn't coming from her bedroom. In fact, the mirror wasn't showing her any light coming from her bedroom. She had missed that at first, but now that she was paying attention, she noticed the distinction.

No, this wasn't possible. Her eyes had to be playing tricks on her.

But then she saw a man leave the bedroom closest to the mirror. His back was to her the whole time he walked down the hall and headed for the staircase, so he didn't look at the mirror.

With a scream, she ran into her bedroom and slammed the door shut. She searched the doorknob for a lock, but there was no lock on it.

What was wrong with the people who'd lived here before? Why hadn't they put a lock on the door? All bedrooms should have doors that locked this day and age.

She searched the room and saw the settee at the foot of the bed. Hoping the man wouldn't come in, she hurried over to it and dragged it to the door, ignoring the marks it made as the wooden feet scraped along the floor. Once she shoved it in front of the door, she took everything heavy she could find and put it on the settee. It wasn't a perfect system, but it was all she could think of to prevent someone from coming in here.

After a moment of staring at the obstacle she'd put up, she rummaged through the bedroom and bathroom to see if there might be any weapon she might use in case the man managed to break in. She found an old candlestick tucked away at the back of the empty armoire. It was better than nothing. She pulled it out and held it to her chest.

She grew still and listened for any noises she might hear from outside the room.

Everything was quiet.

No footsteps or anything else to let her know someone was out there.

What was going on? She hadn't imagined it. Yes, reading the book had spooked her, but it couldn't have spooked her to the point where she was seeing things that weren't there.

She went to the window and looked outside. The clouds were starting to part, showing traces of the sunset across the horizon.

There wasn't another mansion or a road or anything that gave her signs of other people. All she saw was the gazebo, the stables, the trees, and a couple of hills in the far-off distance.

She'd never felt more isolated in her entire life.

And worse, if she needed help, no one would know. Her cord wasn't charging her iPhone. She couldn't even make an emergency phone call.

With her free hand, she rubbed her head as she stumbled over to the bed. She didn't know what else she could do except stay in here until tomorrow morning when Mr. Thompson was due to come by.

She propped one of the pillows up on the headboard and settled against it. She was going to leave the light on tonight. If that man did come in here, she wanted to know about it.

But he wasn't on this side of the mirror. Was he?

She didn't know what to think. Everything had happened so fast, and she was too freaked out to think clearly. All she could do was get through the night and go back to one of the nearby cities. Then she'd stay in a hotel until it was time to fly back to the US.

With a shaky breath, she set the candlestick in her lap and patiently waited for morning.

Chapter Four

Somehow, Willow managed to drift off to sleep at some point during the night. When she woke up, it was morning.

She'd done it! She'd made it through the night!

She scrambled out of the bed and checked the clock on the fireplace mantle. It was 8:30. She had just enough time to pack everything.

She hurried to get dressed, and since it would cut down on her time, she opted to leave her hair in a ponytail. She threw everything into the suitcase and zipped it shut. She hesitated for a moment to remove the items from the door but realized there was only one way she was getting out of this room.

Once she put everything back into place, she picked up the candlestick and opened the door a crack. Sunlight lit up the hallway so it didn't look as creepy as it had last night.

Well, that was promising.

She opened the door further and poked her head into the hallway.

No one was there. All was quiet.

She released her breath and took a tentative step into the hall.

Still, no one.

She glanced at the mirror. She saw a reflection of herself standing in the hallway, gripping the candlestick as if her life depended on it. There was no one else around. There wasn't even the strange flickering light coming from the other bedroom.

To be sure, she glanced, once more, at her surroundings. Everything was the same as it was in the mirror. She released her breath. Maybe it had been a trick of her mind. Or maybe not. She couldn't let her guard down completely.

Chimes came from the front door.

Mr. Thompson was early. Thank goodness!

Clutching the suitcase handle, she ran down the hall and the stairs. She made it to the front door just as he pressed the doorbell again.

"Miss Knudson," Mr. Thompson greeted with a smile, "how have you been?"

Now that she was standing right in front of him, she felt a little foolish about getting so scared, but even so, she said, "I think someone snuck into this house yesterday. Would you mind searching through the place?"

"No, not at all. Violet and her crew have returned in case there was anything that needs to be cleaned or repaired." He gestured to the purple van with pink flowers on it. The words *Violet's Cleaning & Maintenance Service* was painted under the flowers. We'll be more than

happy to see if the intruder is still here."

"Thank you." Feeling much better, Willow put the candlestick on the small table in the foyer. "I've also decided I don't want to stay in this place for the next week. I'd rather stay in a hotel."

"That will be fine. I can take you there. We can put your suitcase in my car, and then I'll talk to Violet about sending her men to search the premises."

Glad it was going to be that easy, she pulled the handle of her suitcase and rolled it to the door. Recalling the car, she stopped and added, "The car in the garage also needs to be looked at again. I tried driving it out of here, and it stalled out at the bridge."

"I'll mention that to her as well. Let me take that for you." He lifted the suitcase.

Without looking back, she followed him to his car. Once he put her suitcase in the trunk, he went over to the van where Violet and her men waited for his instructions.

Already, Willow felt better. She glanced at the mansion. It had some signs of aging on its exterior. The stone walls had seen better days, but overall, it was remarkable it'd been kept up so well over the centuries. She was sure this was going to make an awesome home for someone.

She settled back into the seat and closed her eyes. She hadn't realized how much she had missed talking to another person until now. Maybe if she'd had access to the internet or could have watched TV, she wouldn't have felt so isolated. The lack of communication with the outside world made this place feel like it'd been suspended here in time, as if it was waiting for Lord Blackwell to return.

She shivered and opened her eyes. The day was a bright and sunny one. There were puddles here and there, and the grass was still wet, but for the most part, the effects of the rain were gone. It left the place with a cheerful appearance.

When Mr. Thompson got into the driver seat, she straightened up.

"I'm sorry your stay here wasn't the holiday you were expecting," he said as he started the car.

"Holiday?" she asked.

"Vacation," he clarified.

She further relaxed as he drove down the driveaway. "I'm not used to spending so much time doing nothing. I like to keep busy."

"Well, there's plenty to do in the city. You'll have lots to keep you occupied. Still, I hope it was a nice experience to be out here, minus the intruder."

"It was." Since nothing bad had happened to her, she could say it had been fun to spend a few days in a luxurious estate. She didn't plan to spend the money she got from the sale of this place on anything

lavish. All she needed was a nice little home. Ideally, this would happen after she found someone to marry, but it was hard to know what the future would bring.

"We can take care of the paperwork at a restaurant," Mr. Thompson said.

That sounded good to her. She hadn't had anything to eat that morning. There was no way she could have made anything in that large kitchen where someone could be hiding, especially with all of those sharp knives nearby. She crossed her arms and pushed that particular thought out of her mind. She supposed, if nothing else, she did have an interesting story to tell her co-workers.

She took a moment to appreciate the work that had gone into arranging the shrubs on both sides of the driveway so that they lined the path perfectly. Had Lord Blackwell been the one who had instructed the gardener to do this, or had it been someone else in the family tree who'd been responsible for it?

She probably should do some research on her family line after she got back to the US. It would be interesting to see if she could trace everyone back to Lord Blackwell. And who knew? Maybe she could go even farther than that.

They reached the bridge, and, to her surprise, the car stalled out, just as the one in the garage had.

Mr. Thompson frowned and turned the key in the ignition to get it to start, but it didn't work.

"This is a new car," he said. "There's no reason why it shouldn't work."

"This is exactly what happened to me yesterday," she replied. With a sigh, she asked, "How far is it to the nearest gas station or some form of civilization?"

"You'll have to walk a little over two hours. The road going to the main highway is almost an hour long." He gestured to the path covered with trees. "We'd be better off having the mechanic take care of this car after he sees to the car in the garage."

She didn't feel like waiting all that time. After a moment, she asked, "Would you mind if I walked toward town now? You can pick me up after you get this car fixed."

He winced. "I can't guarantee this car will be able to run. I mean, it was working just fine this morning. I had no trouble getting here. This happened so suddenly."

"Then you can get me when Violet and her company leave. I just don't feel like sitting around and waiting. Besides, I haven't walked for a while. It'll be nice to get some exercise. I really don't mind."

He hesitated but nodded. "Okay. I'll pick you up on my way out."

Relieved, she hurried to the back of the car and took her suitcase.

"I don't mind bringing that with me," he told her.

"I know, but my things are in here, and I feel better not leaving them. The road is smooth," she continued when she noted the uncertainty on his face. "I won't have any trouble rolling it behind me."

"It's your suitcase," he replied. "I'm in no position to tell you what to do."

Great. That settled, she took her suitcase and put it on the ground. Then she pulled the handle and headed for the bridge. "I'll see you when you head down there." She pointed to the row of trees.

He nodded, and she walked down to the bridge. She made it halfway across the bridge when something zapped her. She jumped back. It didn't hurt, but it did shock her. She made another attempt to step forward, but she was zapped again.

What on earth…?

She reached out and tapped the invisible wall. A trace of purple and pink swirl rippled through the air.

Her eyes grew wide.

She had to be seeing things.

She reached out again, and once more, the ripple went out across the air.

Holding her breath, she pressed her hand to the air and felt the zap go up her arm.

She stepped to her right and pushed against the barrier. The ripple went out all around her, and she saw the moat glow with purple and pink swirling colors.

Something strange was going on, and she didn't have the slightest idea what was causing it.

The car behind her started up. Startled, she turned. Mr. Thompson waved for her to get back into his vehicle.

She glanced at the invisible barrier. She didn't know if she could go past it, but now she had to see if *she* was the reason the car had stalled.

She returned to the car and got in as he put the suitcase back into the trunk. As soon as she sat in the seat, the engine died.

Without shutting the trunk, Mr. Thompson hurried over to the driver's side and tried starting the car.

Sure it would start back up once she got out, she tested her theory, and sure enough, the engine started. Mr. Thompson muttered something about how strange his car was acting, but she ignored him and went back to the middle of the bridge. For some reason, she wasn't able to leave. There was nothing wrong with that car in the garage.

This invisible barrier that surrounded the property was going to

keep her here. She touched the barrier again, and the pink and purple colors rippled out and vibrated across the moat. The moat circled the entire property. She was, essentially, a prisoner here. And she would continue to be one until she figured a way out of this mess.

She returned to Mr. Thompson. “Would you drive across the bridge and come back?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “I can turn around here if you want me to take you back to Nightingale Hall. I don’t blame you for not trusting my car to get you to the city.”

She shook her head. “I just want to see if you can go over that bridge and come back.”

He waited for her to explain, but there was no way she could do that. He’d think she was insane! She hardly believed it herself.

After a moment, he shrugged, closed the trunk, and returned to his driver seat. She stepped back and watched as he drove across the bridge. She didn’t see any colors ripple out, and the moat didn’t glow with colors, either. She directed her attention back to the car. Mr. Thompson turned his vehicle around on the other side of the bridge and drove back over it. Again, nothing.

She supposed she should be panicking, but she was too stunned to fully grasp everything that was happening.

He pulled to a stop when he reached her. “Would you like me to take you to the city? I think the car will make it.”

“No. I’ll just return to the house.” She got into the car and waited for a few seconds to speak. “All the other people who inherited this place came and left whenever they wanted, didn’t they?”

“Yes. I was the one who handled the will when Greg Westmore inherited this place.” He smiled. “I was in my early twenties back then. It’s hard to believe. It feels like I first came to this place yesterday.”

“And Greg said he wasn’t able to sell it?”

“Silly, I know, but maybe he had a sentimental fondness for it.”

She had a feeling that wasn’t the case. She bet, for whatever reason, Greg could not physically sell it. If this estate had the ability to physically prevent her from leaving, it could prevent someone from selling it. She wasn’t sure how, but it had to be the case.

Could it be magic?

She hadn’t believed in magic before. Was she going to believe in it now?

Could she afford not to believe in it in light of the fact that the invisible barrier only held *her* here?

But why her? What made her so special that the place didn’t want her to go?

She wondered what would happen if she tried to sign the contract

to sell this place. She glanced at Mr. Thompson's briefcase.

"When we get back, I'll sign the contract," she told him.

He nodded and continued driving in silence. Once he came to a stop in front of the mansion, the mechanic came out of the garage and went over to them.

"Everything looks fine to me, Miss Knudson," he told her. "But to be sure, I did some adjustments to the engine, and then I emptied the fluids and put new fluids in. Sometimes cars are temperamental things." He took his hat off and wiped his forehead.

The only reason Willow noticed the white streak in his hair was that the white was such a strong contrast to the rest of his hair which was pitch black.

He put the hat back on and held the key out to her. "Would you like to drive it to test it out?"

"No thanks," Willow said as she took the key. What was the point? The property wasn't going to let her leave. She already knew the car would stall out at the bridge. "I appreciate you taking a look at it."

He smiled. "Happy to do it. I love tinkering with things." He pulled out an apple from his pocket and bit into it as he went to the van.

Mr. Thompson came to her with her suitcase. "We can go into the sitting room to take care of the contract. Before I leave, I'll make sure there's no intruder in the house. I don't feel comfortable leaving you here without making sure you'll be safe."

She appreciated that. If she had to be stuck here, she'd like to make sure she was safe, too.

When they were back in the house, one of Violet's crewmen approached them.

"We just finished checking the place, and there's no one here. Whoever was here is long gone now," he told Willow and Mr. Thompson. "To be sure no one is able to get back in, I made sure everything is locked, and I put a new lock on the front door." He held out the key to Willow. "This is for the door."

"Thank you," Willow replied and took it from him. She made eye contact with him. She had seen people with green eyes before, but his were a brighter shade of green than she recalled seeing before.

"Think nothing of it," he replied. "I love working with locks and checking to make sure everything is as it should be."

She relaxed. It was nice to know the intruder was long gone. That made her feel much better about staying here all by herself.

She followed Mr. Thompson to the sitting room.

"You should sit here since you're the mistress of the estate," Mr. Thompson said as he pulled the chair out from behind the desk.

Without meaning to, she looked up at the portrait of Lord Blackwell and wondered what he would think of her trying to sell this

estate. Again, she couldn't help but feel that he never intended for someone to come along and sell it. It was meant to be in the family line forever.

But then, she might not be able to sell it, so this whole thing would be moot. She sat in the chair and Mr. Thompson opened his briefcase.

He took about ten minutes to explain what was in the contract. They got to the last page when another one of Violet's crewmen came into the room. Like the others, he wore a white uniform, but he was shorter than the others and had a round face with a nose that looked as if someone had smushed it in.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he said. "I'll come back."

"You haven't interrupted anything," Mr. Thompson replied. "You can come in."

The man glanced from Mr. Thompson to Willow, and since she nodded, he took off his hat, revealing light-brown hair that had a feathered look to it.

"I haven't seen any signs of rodents," he said.

"Rodents? Does that mean there's mice here?" Willow asked.

"Not anymore," he replied. "I set out traps the last time I was here, and I found two. I found the openings they were using to get in and covered them up. You don't have anything to worry about now."

She hid the urge to let him and Mr. Thompson know how grossed out this made her. If she had thought there might be rodents slipping into this mansion when she first arrived, she would have insisted on staying at a hotel.

Not that it would have done any good. The invisible barrier wouldn't have let her leave. As soon as she came here, she was trapped.

Just who had put that barrier there? And why? And, more importantly, could she ever leave?

"That's good news," Mr. Thompson said, interrupting her thoughts. "It's nice to have everything in tip-top shape."

Willow forced out an agreement. If she had to be stuck here, it was nice to know a bunch of mice, or a human intruder, weren't going to be with her.

The man left, and Mr. Thompson turned back to the contract.

When it came time for her to sign it to give him permission to sell the estate, the pen ran out of ink.

"That's funny," Mr. Thompson said. "It was working just fine earlier today."

As he rummaged in his briefcase for another pen, a sense of unease crept over her. This was going to be just like the barrier at the bridge. She wasn't going to be able to sign the contract. She just knew it.

She studied the air around her. There were no pink or purple

colors rippling anywhere.

Mr. Thompson gave her another pen. “Try this one.”

She did, and the same thing happened.

“Huh. This is strange.” He pulled out a piece of blank paper from his briefcase and scribbled on it. The pen worked just fine. “There. Now it works.”

He gave the pen back to her.

Sure it wasn’t going to work, she tried to sign her name, but, as she expected, the ink wouldn’t cooperate.

“I don’t understand this,” he said, not hiding his shock.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him if the same thing had happened to Greg.

“Try this one,” Mr. Thompson said as he gave her a third pen. “This one is brand new. It has to work.”

Yeah, right. Instead of voicing her sarcastic reply, she took the pen and made another attempt to sign her name. Not surprising, this time wasn’t any more successful than the others had been.

“Those are the only pens I brought with me,” Mr. Thompson said.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied. “None of them will work.”

“That can’t be true. It’s not logical.” He put the contract and the pens back into his briefcase. “I have a couple of other clients I need to take care of over the next two days. Do you mind waiting for me to return to sign the contract?”

“No, I don’t mind.” She was doubtful Thursday would be any different from today, but a part of her needed to find out. If for no other reason than to know she was going to be trapped here for the rest of her life or if this was a temporary situation.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” he said as he closed the suitcase. “I know you were hoping this would be a smooth and quick process.”

“I don’t have to fly back to the US until later this week. I’ll be fine.”

Since there was no point in staying at the desk, she stood up. She glanced at the portrait of Lord Blackwell. Did he have something to do with all of this?

“You have more than enough to get you by for another month if you have to stay here longer,” Mr. Thompson told her.

She frowned. She hadn’t thought of what would happen long term. If she was doomed to spend the rest of her life here, how would she get food? She understood the money wrapped up in the estate was being handled by Mr. Thompson, so that would take care of the utilities, maintenance, and taxes. But food and toiletries were another problem.

“If I need to stay here longer than that, can someone bring me food and things like soap and toilet paper?” she asked.

Mr. Thompson thought over the question for a moment. “I suppose if you decided to live here permanently, then something could be arranged. Greg left the estate in good standing. We could always discuss investing most of the money to make sure you don’t run out.”

That might be the path she would have to take.

She didn’t understand why Greg and all of the other ancestors were able to leave this place while she couldn’t.

“Is there anything else I can do for you before I go?” Mr. Thompson asked.

Recalling her iPhone, she replied, “Do you have a cord to power something like an iPhone?”

“I do, as a matter of fact.” He opened his briefcase again. “I got it for my son, but I can always get another one when I get back to town.” He took an unopened package and showed it to her. “Will this work for the one you have?”

“Yes. That’s perfect.” She took the cord. “Thanks. I have a couple of pounds in my wallet.”

“It’s on me,” he told her before she could reach into her jeans’ pocket. “Considering everything that’s happened, it’s the least I can do.” He closed the briefcase and glanced around the room. “I don’t think there’s anything else for now. If you run into any emergencies, call me.”

“I will.”

It’d be great to get her phone working again. At least with all this craziness, there would be some sense of normalcy to hold onto.

She walked with Mr. Thompson to the front door. The only car in the driveway belonged to Mr. Thompson. Violet’s van was already gone.

“I’ll be back at eight o’clock Thursday morning,” Mr. Thompson told her. “To be safe, you should lock the door after I leave.”

“I’ll do that,” Willow replied.

When he left, she shut the door and locked it. She grabbed her suitcase and carried it back upstairs.

Her gaze went to the mirror in the hallway as she went to her bedroom. Her steps slowed as she looked at it. Nothing was out of the ordinary. There was no flickering light coming from the wrong bedroom. There was no one but her in the reflection. She glanced around the hall and then back at the mirror. Everything looked exactly as it was in the hall she was standing in.

She released her breath. After all the weird stuff going on, it wouldn’t surprise her if something jumped out at her from that thing.

She went into her bedroom and put the suitcase back on the chair that was against the wall. She scanned the room. It looked just as disheveled as she’d left it.

She unzipped the suitcase and pulled out her iPhone. After she got the cord out of the package, she plugged it into the outlet and then plugged her phone in. Nothing happened to let her know the battery was charging.

Maybe after she had something to eat, she would see evidence of the battery charging. She went back downstairs and took her time in making an omelet. She supposed if there was somewhere she had to be trapped in for the rest of her life, this would be the ideal place for it.

But surely, there had to be a way out of here. This couldn't be something she'd be stuck with forever. Even Greg and all of the others got to leave.

She almost ate outside on the porch in the back, but after a moment, she decided to eat in the kitchen. It would probably take her a day or two before she felt comfortable going outside all alone.

Once she was done eating, she returned to her bedroom and checked the iPhone. It wasn't charging. She tried plugging it back in. Nothing.

She put the cord into an outlet one of the lamps was plugged into. Nothing there, either. Though the lamp worked just fine, the outlet didn't work for the cord.

She couldn't believe it was the phone. It'd been working just fine the morning she arrived here.

Was it possible that in addition to not being able to leave this place or sign the contract, she was unable to access anything that would give her a connection to the outside world?

No. That was ridiculous. Something like that could never happen.

And yet, you can't physically leave here or sign a piece of paper agreeing to sell the estate.

She stared at the iPhone for a long moment. What could she do? She was stuck here. She set the phone into her suitcase and sat on the bed.

Just what was she supposed to do now?

Chapter Five

June 17, 1817

Julian Azazel, the Earl of Blackwell, woke up late on this particular morning. Not that it mattered when he woke up. Every day was the same. Ever since he first woke up on June 17, 1817 over two centuries ago, he'd been stuck in an endless cycle of repeating the same day over and over. He knew he wasn't stuck in Hell, but it sure felt like it.

He rubbed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. Did he have it in him to get up and be around the servants and pretend nothing was unusual, or should he stay in bed and wait for tomorrow? He'd spent many days in bed. Just waiting for the next day. A day that would be just like this one. The endless loop of time where he and the servants never aged.

The servants didn't realize they were in this state of limbo. They thought no time had passed. For them, yesterday was June 16 and tomorrow would be June 18.

June 16 had been so long ago that Julian could barely remember what happened. All he recalled was that he'd received a missive that told him the curse would begin at midnight. At the time, he had laughed and threw the parchment into the fire. What a silly thing, he'd thought. Curses. Who believed in such things?

A little over two hundred years later, he was no longer laughing. He wished he'd kept that missive. There were other sentences written on it, but he couldn't remember them. All he recalled was the thing about the curse because he'd thought it was so ludicrous.

A lot of his past had slipped away from him over the years as well. The longer he lived, the harder it was to remember much of anything.

There was a knock on his door. That was the valet.

With a reluctant sigh, he sat up and forced himself to get out of bed. He trudged to the door and opened it. As expected, the valet was there.

Before his valet could ask what he wanted to wear and if he wanted a shave, Julian said, "I think I'll take a bath this morning. Then I'll dress."

The valet nodded and headed down the hall.

Julian closed the door. The only time the servants did anything different was if he instructed them to do something different. Otherwise, the valet would have come in and helped him find a suitable outfit for his morning's ride.

Julian did recall taking a ride on his stallion that morning all those years ago. Even though there was a light rain, he had wanted to check

on the newly planted shrubs and trees that were in front of the property. He had thought the dirt path leading to and away from the bridge had been barren. He'd spent most of his life looking at it and thinking it made the front of the property seem drab. Some trees and shrubs would give the place more appeal. Little did he know he'd never see the things grow.

He set out his grooming supplies on his vanity. Even though he had left them there the previous day, they always returned to the drawer. Everything returned to the way it'd been that first July 17th morning. It was as if someone took the hands on a clock and wound them back, and when that happened, all of the things in his estate returned to their original position.

He'd made a significant mess all through the manor over the centuries just to see what would happen. His servants were appalled by what they referred to as his strange outbursts. They been especially bewildered when he'd refused to let the maids clean anything. But when he woke up the next morning, everything was clean and the maids had no idea he'd shocked them so terribly by intentionally ruining things.

Today, he wouldn't ruin anything. He'd just treat it like any other day. He'd like to pretend it was June 16 or June 18. Just to have any other day than June 17 would be wonderful.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He slowly released it and looked at his reflection in the mirror. "Isn't it funny that you're over 200 years old, but you haven't aged a bit?" It was a joke he told himself once in a while.

This morning, however, it did nothing to lighten his mood. He didn't feel like riding his horse, either. He glanced out the window. The rain gently pattering outside would grow stronger later in the day, but there wouldn't be a downpour. It would just be a continual rainfall through the entire day.

The groundskeeper would find a crack in the gazebo and fix it. The butler would bring Julian a tray of tea and crumpets in the middle of the day but drop it. No matter what room he was in or what Julian had to eat or drink, the butler would drop it. The maid would clean it up. The only way to prevent that was to tell the butler he'd wait until dinner to eat or drink anything. Then, after dinner, the maid would tell Julian the grandfather clock stopped working.

Julian rubbed his eyes again. Did he have it in him to go through all of this again? Maybe he'd be better off staying in bed and not having anything to eat or drink.

There was another knock at the door. That would be the maids and his valet with the tub and pails of hot water.

He put on his robe then called out for them to enter. He stood to

the side as they put the tub by the window and filled it.

The younger maid put a chair on the left side of the tub and put the folded towel and a bar of soap on it. She turned to him. “Will there be anything else, my lord?”

He shook his head. One time he had yelled at her, just to see if she would remember how mean he’d been to her the day before. But she hadn’t. None of the servants ever remembered anything cruel or obnoxious he’d said and done over the years. And at this point, he was so exhausted, he didn’t even care about how aloof he seemed. All he wanted was for June 18 to come.

They left the bedroom, and after he washed up, he soaked in the tub until the water got too cold for him to tolerate anymore.

He summoned the valet, and he chose a somber gray color to wear to go with the drab mood he was in. Then he requested the shave.

Downstairs, the poached eggs, peaches, and crumpets would be waiting for him. He could request a different refreshment or dinner, but Cook always served the same breakfast. That was because Cook never remembered it when he requested something different in the evening before he relieved Cook of his duties for the night.

After the valet left, Julian wondered what he should do that day to occupy his time. He’d read every single book in the place more times than he cared to admit. He’d ridden his horse to the point of not wanting to ever ride a horse ever again. He’d taken walks. He’d even taken over the servants’ tasks on numerous occasions. He wasn’t sure what he ought to do that day that would give him a single spark of excitement.

Maybe he’d just walk aimlessly through the entire place again.

He left his bedchamber and started to turn in the direction that would take him to the staircase when something different caught his attention.

Something different?

He had to stop and give the hallway a careful study before he realized what had changed.

It was the strange painting on the wall next to his bedchamber, which was at the end of the hall. It was taller than him, and it stopped just above his ankles. It was the dullest thing he’d ever seen. It was just an image of a white sheet. He had touched it a couple of times, but it was hard to the touch. It made him think of a mirror. But it wasn’t a mirror because it didn’t reflect him or anything in the hallway back at him. All it showed him was that crumpled white sheet covering. He’d ordered the servants to remove it, have it painted over, and even break it. But it always came back the next day. He’d long since given up on it.

Today, however, there was no image of that sheet. Instead, he saw

his hallway. He was nowhere in the image, but everything else in the hallway was. He walked closer to it, his heart leaping with hope for the first time since he could remember.

Different was good. Different had to be good. Different had to mean, he was about to finally be rid of June 17, 1817.

Upon closer inspection, he realized that sunlight was coming in through the hall in the painting. He turned and looked behind him. It was still raining out. There was not a trace of sunlight in the sky.

How was it possible that he was looking at his own hallway, but it was different on his side of the painting?

It wasn't a painting. It was something else.

He hesitated for a moment but reached up and tapped the thing. He felt glass. He always felt glass. That wasn't unusual. But the image behind that glass was new.

He put his hand up to the glass and pressed his palm into it.

Nothing happened.

He touched it with his other hand, and nothing happened.

With a frown, he glanced around the hall. He knew he was looking at a reflection of his hall, but this hadn't been there before. So, what did it mean?

On impulse, he went to his bedchamber and brought the chair out into the hall. The hallway in the painting-like object didn't show the chair, either.

He didn't know what to make of it. He was sure this change had to mean something. He had to spend the day figuring this out. Who knew if this anomaly would happen a second time?

He returned the chair to his bedchamber just as the maids and butler came in to take the tub.

"What day is it?" he asked the butler.

"It's Tuesday, my lord," the butler said.

"What's the date?" Julian clarified.

"June 17."

"And the year?"

The butler's eyebrows furrowed. "1817, my lord. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, I think so."

For a moment, Julian had entertained the idea that he'd been wrong about it being June 17, 1817. He'd actually thought it might be another day. But that didn't mean all hope was lost. The difference in that object in the hall had never happened before. That had to be significant. It had to mean something.

He left the bedchamber and went back to it. Granted, this wasn't a painting, but it had to be something.

He heard the butler and maids leave his room, so he watched to

see if he could see their reflection. But he couldn't. He couldn't see himself, either. It was as if they didn't exist. And yet the hallway did.

"Will you come downstairs to eat?" the butler asked him.

He was tempted to tell the butler to bring his meal up here, but since nothing was happening in the strange painting-like object, he decided to follow the others down the stairs.

After he ate, Julian came back up to the hallway. Nothing had changed in the painting-like object, but in case something happened, he decided it was worth spending the entire day watching it. He retrieved a chair from his bedchamber and sat in front of the object.

It appeared to be a reflection of his hallway, but it definitely wasn't. The clouds still cast his hallway in the shadows. On the other side, the sun made the duplicate hallway bright.

He would wait here and see if other differences emerged. He didn't know what he was going to do when they did. Would it change his situation?

Probably not.

He'd probably still be stuck in this day for many more years to come. For all he knew, this was his eternal future. He might never be free from the curse that bound him here.

But today, for the first time in two centuries, he had noticed something different. And that had to mean something. It had to be important.

At exactly 1:35, the butler came up with the tray of tea and crumpets. Julian couldn't believe he'd forgotten to tell the butler not to bring that to him today. The butler stumbled in the hall, and the teapot and plate of crumpets fell to the floor.

Julian mouthed the words, "Oh, I-I'm terribly sorry," as the butler spoke them aloud.

The butler hurried to collect the teapot before all the tea spread further on the floor. Julian hesitated to get up and help him. What if something happened in that other hallway?

After a moment, he prayed nothing would change and helped the butler gather the crumpets.

"I don't know what came over me," the butler said. "I think it's been one of those days. I keep dropping things."

"It's all right. It can be cleaned up." Julian finished putting everything on the tray and took the cloth that was dangling on the side of the tray. No matter what, that cloth always managed to remain clean. He wiped his hands on it and tossed it back on the tray. "I'll summon the maid. You should sit and rest."

The butler offered another apology and hurried back downstairs.

Julian pulled the cord on his bedchamber wall then ran back to the painting-like object.

Except for more sunlight coming into the other hallway, nothing looked different.

He didn't know if that was good or not. He only had until midnight for something to happen. When he woke up tomorrow, the original painting of the sheet might be back.

Midnight. He pulled out his pocket watch. That gave him ten and a half hours left in this particular version of June 17. He might not get another chance to see this.

He tucked the pocket watch back into his pocket and returned to the chair.

The maid came up and cleaned what he and the butler hadn't been able to get. He hesitated to ask her what she saw in the other hallway, but since she wouldn't remember this conversation tomorrow, it wouldn't matter if she thought the question was absurd.

Turning to her, he asked, "What do you see over there?" He pointed to the object.

She looked up from the rag she'd just put into the bucket. "It's a mirror."

"It can't be a mirror. Our reflections aren't in it."

"It has to be a mirror. There's nothing beyond the wall it's hanging on."

He stood up and walked up to the object. "Do you see me in there?"

She furrowed her eyebrows.

He waved his hand in front of the object.

She gasped.

No, she didn't see him. So he wasn't imagining things. There was something strange going on.

"The manor ends at that wall," she said as she slowly walked over to him. "The hall can't continue on that way." She gave it a light tap and relaxed. "Just as I thought. The hallway isn't continuing on past this thing. It's a painting."

"But paintings don't change," he replied. "Earlier today, there was less light in there. Now there's more."

"Light?"

"The sunlight. It's more pronounced. If you come back up in a couple of hours, I'm sure it'll look different. That," for lack of a better word, he said, "*thing* changes. It doesn't stay the same. A painting stays the same."

After a moment, she shrugged. "I'm just a maid. You're the one who has a proper education. If you say it's not a painting, I believe

you.”

He frowned. He didn’t like the sound of that. She thought he was wrong. “Come back at five. I’ll show you it’s different.”

He could tell she didn’t want to come back, but out of her duty to obey him, she offered a nod before she picked up the bucket and went back down the stairs.

He sat back in the chair and continued his vigil.

Chapter Six

Julian didn't realize he had dozed off until he almost fell off the chair. He hurried to straighten up and looked at the other hallway. The lighting had changed, but nothing else was different. He took his pocket watch out. It was 4:50.

How long had he nodded off? Had anything of consequence happened while he wasn't paying attention? He had been careful to only relieve his bladder when it was absolutely necessary, and he'd gone as quickly as possible in order to return here. From what he could see, everything remained the same except the amount of sunlight coming into that hallway.

This might lead to nothing. It was very possible that this whole endeavor might come up as empty as everything else he'd done for two centuries.

With a heavy sigh, he slipped the pocket watch back into his pocket.

He heard footsteps behind him and spun around in time to see the maid who'd cleaned the floor earlier that day.

"You asked me to come here at five, my lord?" she asked.

"Yes." He jumped up from the chair and went to the thing that separated him from the other hallway. "Do you remember the position of the sun earlier today in here?" He tapped the glass.

Despite the apprehensive expression on her face, she approached the thing and took a good look at it. "It's hard to tell, but I think it might have changed a little."

"I thought so," he whispered, glad that he wasn't the only one who noticed it.

"What can this thing possibly be if it's not a painting?"

"I don't know, but it's something important." He tapped the glass again. It was solid. He wasn't going to get in there.

The maid took another good look at it and shrugged. "Whoever painted it must have used unusual paints and an unusual canvas. It has to be a trick. No painting is alive. It doesn't really change. It's like a magician at a show. When I was a girl, I saw him do all sorts of tricks that seemed real. They were only illusions. This thing has to be like that."

He wasn't sure if she was saying that for his benefit or for hers. If he hadn't been aware they'd all been reliving the same day for two centuries, he'd be inclined to give a reasonable explanation for this strange object, too.

But, unfortunately, he had the misfortune of being aware of every single day for the past two centuries. He could not give this thing a

rational explanation. This had something with the touch of something outside of reason attached to it.

"Is there anything else you require of me?" the maid asked.

He shook his head. "No. You may go."

As she left, he returned to his chair.

And waited.

And waited.

An hour later, the butler came up. "My lord, dinner is ready."

Despite the fact that Julian was hungry, he couldn't leave this spot. "I'm not going to the dining room. I'm going to stay here."

"Would you like me to bring your dinner up here?"

Julian shook his head. "I'll be all right."

The butler left, and once more, Julian was alone.

Another hour passed, and Julian had to light some candles and set them on the floor along the hallway. As he suspected, the other hallway grew darker. No candles had been placed on that side of the painting-like object.

The maid came up to tell him the grandfather clock had stopped working. He offered a nod to let her know he heard her.

Once she left, he sat back down and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

His patience finally paid off when, just after the sun set on the other side, someone began to walk toward him from the other hallway. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't imagining her. She wore clothes he'd never seen on a lady before. A shirt that went past her hips, pants, and strange slippers with ties. Her hair was also pulled up into an unusual style.

Once he overcame his shock, he ran to the object and tapped the glass with the palm of his hand. "Hello! Do you see me?" He tapped the glass again.

The lady didn't look at him right away, but she did as she slowed to go to the bedchamber that was next to his.

Encouraged, he tapped the glass a third time. "I'm Julian. Can you see me?"

She gasped and ran into the bedchamber.

"No, wait! Don't go!" This time he pounded the glass. "I have to talk to you!" He waited for a minute, but she didn't come back out. "Please! You don't know what I've been through. I've waited for two centuries for something new to happen. I won't hurt you. I just want to talk."

Her bedchamber door remained closed.

He pressed his forehead against the cool glass and felt a sob rise up in his throat. "Please, come back. You don't know what I've been

through."

He closed his eyes and let the tears fall down his cheeks. After all this time, something different had happened. Something he hadn't had any control over. And there was nothing he could do about it.

He didn't want to wake up tomorrow and find out it was June 17 all over again. He wanted out of this nightmare. He wanted it all to be over.

All of his strength left him, and he fell to the floor against the object that had given him a sliver of hope from the endless cycle he was stuck in. For the first time since he could remember, he had felt that time was going to finally move forward again.

Maybe he had died and didn't realize it. Maybe he was stuck in Hell after all.

He thought over what he could remember of his past, and he didn't recall dying. He recalled a childhood spent here with his parents. He'd had picnics with his parents. He'd played with Francis, his cousin, when his uncle and aunt came for visits. Francis had been a childhood friend. When he grew up, he went to London, and they became even better friends.

The last he recalled, Francis had just gotten betrothed to Lady Kimberly. He and Francis had celebrated the upcoming marriage before word came that Julian's father died and he had to come here to make sure the estate was in order. He was only supposed to be here for one month.

But one month had turned into two centuries. If he wasn't so exhausted, he would have yelled in frustration.

What had he done to deserve this?

He heard the sound of footsteps but knew it was on his side of the hall, so he didn't get up.

"Are you all right, my lord?" the butler asked. "I thought I heard you screaming up here."

What could he say? The butler wouldn't remember anything that he told him when he woke up the next day. "I'm fine," he finally said, his voice devoid of emotion.

The butler hesitated but then replied, "If you need anything, I'll come back."

Julian didn't respond as the butler went back down the hall.

Julian went to his bedchamber well after midnight. He was sure it was still June 17. He would ask one of his servants tomorrow morning to make sure, but he doubted seeing that lady in the other hallway would change anything. It was enough to know that the hallway was

still there in that painting-like object after the clock struck midnight. The white sheet hadn't returned.

Julian checked the time as he took his pocket watch out. It was 2:35 in the morning. He set the pocket watch on the dresser then glanced outside his bedchamber. The candles still lit up his hallway with plenty of light. He wondered if he should make another attempt at reaching the lady in that other hallway. She'd been scared when she saw him. He hadn't meant to scare her. But as he thought back on it, a different approach might have worked better.

After a moment, an idea came to him.

He returned to the hall and retrieved one of his candles. He brought it back with him into his bedchamber and carried it into the small room where he set it on his desk. He searched through the top drawer for parchment. He hadn't written anything in so long that he wasn't sure if the ink in the inkwell would be fresh.

He paused and took a look at the inkwell. Of course, the ink would be good. The food never rotted. No one aged. Everything was just like it had been on that original morning of June 17 all those years ago.

Encouraged, he took out a piece of parchment and set it on the desk. He unscrewed the top of the inkwell and dipped the quill into it. When he brought the quill out, the ink was suitable for use. He pressed the quill to the parchment and wrote, *Can you read this?*

He paused. No. That wouldn't do any good. He had to come up with something where he might get a response.

After a moment, he dug out another piece of parchment and wrote, *If you can read this, write back and let me know. I can't go into your hallway. This is the only way I can communicate with you.*

He reread the sentence. It wasn't perfect, but it would do.

He left the room and moved his chair so that it was right in front of the painting-like object. He blew out one of the candles and removed it from the candlestick. Then he propped the parchment up so that it was resting on the candlestick.

There.

He took a cautious step back. The parchment didn't fall over.

He wasn't sure if this would work, but it was better than doing nothing. Tomorrow when he woke up, maybe he would see a response on the other side.

He picked up the other candles and brought them into his bedchamber. Then, after he got ready for bed, he blew them out and went to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Willow waited until the sun had been up for a couple of hours before she pushed aside all of the objects she had set up as a barrier to her bedroom. Though she hadn't heard the man's footsteps in the hall, she'd seen him coming toward her in that mirror.

Once she got into her bedroom, she'd secured the doorway and waited for him to try to get in. But nothing happened. The rest of the night had been quiet.

Eerily quiet.

She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Violet's crew had made sure the entire place was safe. She hadn't once unlocked any of the doors or windows. She'd even taken the time to search the entire place before coming up here yesterday evening.

She shivered and retrieved the candlestick. If she could make it to the kitchen, she was going to grab the largest knife she could find. A candlestick just wasn't enough to defend herself.

She hated the predicament she was in. She couldn't make a phone call. She couldn't leave the property. That invisible barrier wouldn't let her out. She didn't feel safe going outside where anyone could be. And she wasn't safe inside this place, either.

She had to fight back the urge to cry. The only recourse she had was to kill the intruder if he made another attempt to get to her. She had to get to the kitchen. She couldn't stay locked away in this bedroom forever.

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves then slowly opened the door. The hall was vacant. All was quiet. She released her breath. So far, so good. Gripping the candlestick, she took a tentative step into the hall.

Everything was still okay.

Despite the fact that she didn't want to look at the mirror, she forced her gaze in that direction. She gasped when she noticed the chair. There was no chair on her side of the mirror. How on earth could there be one on the other side of it?

She blinked as she struggled to put all of the pieces of this puzzle together. This place had an invisible barrier keeping her stuck here. She wasn't able to sign a contract selling the estate. There was nothing like a TV or computer to connect her to the outside world, and she couldn't charge her iPhone. So really, was that chair on the other side of the mirror so odd?

Of course, it was. Mirrors were reflections of the stuff in front of them. They weren't like windows.

Except this one was.

Making sure that the strange man wasn't anywhere nearby, she tiptoed over to the mirror. The chair didn't move. Upon inspection she realized there was a piece of paper with cursive writing on it.

Her steps came to a stop. Did she want to know what was on that paper?

She waited for a few seconds as she debated whether she should read the message.

Oh, who was she kidding? She had to check it out. She'd die of curiosity if she didn't.

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure she was alone then inched to the mirror so she could read it.

If you can read this, write back and let me know. I can't go into your hallway. This is the only way I can communicate with you.

He couldn't get into her hallway?

She turned back. No one was there. She was still alone.

Or so it seemed.

She read the message again. The writing had to be from that man, even though the handwriting was far more stylish than anything she'd seen. But then, the historical documents she'd seen had elaborate swirls and loops like this, too.

If he was telling the truth, then that meant she was safe in this mansion. She didn't have to worry about an intruder. The intruder was stuck in the mirror.

Much like she was stuck on this property.

Could it really be possible?

Was there any way it could *not* be possible?

She paused for a long moment then decided to see what would happen if she did as he asked and wrote back.

She went to her bedroom and, after shutting the door, sorted through her suitcase until she found her notebook and pen. She opened the notebook to a blank page. Just what did someone write to a person who was on the other side of a mirror?

She tapped the pen on the notebook for a few minutes then wrote, *I read your message. How is it possible you're on the other side of this mirror?*

She ripped the paper from the notebook and dug through her suitcase until she found her gum. It was a crude way of attaching a message to a mirror, but she had no idea where any tape was.

Once she chewed on her stick of gum to get it to soften up, she returned to the door and slowly opened it. Again, no one was in the hallway. She began to step out when she noticed a middle-aged man in a dark outfit in the mirror. He was heading toward her. Gasping, she went back into the room and picked up the candlestick. That was a different man from the one she'd seen before. The other one had

been younger.

Just how many intruders was she dealing with?

She peered out of the doorway. No one was in the hall.

Surprised, she stuck her head further into the hallway.

Still no one. And all was quiet.

She turned her gaze to the mirror. The man stood in front of the bedroom door closest to the mirror.

She rubbed her eyes and took another look at the mirror. The man was still there. But he was only on the other side of the mirror. He wasn't in her hallway. Remaining out of sight, she watched as he talked to someone who was in that bedroom.

"I'm losing my mind," she whispered. "This can't be happening."

The man grew silent as he waited for someone to answer him. Then the man spoke again. She couldn't hear him. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't even heard him walking in the hall. The man nodded and turned to go back down the hall.

She darted back into her room and waited. No one passed in front of her.

Daring a peek outside the doorway, she could only see him in the mirror, and he was retreating down the other hall.

What was going on?

She couldn't be seeing ghosts. Ghosts didn't exist. And if they did, they wouldn't be wandering the halls during the day.

No. She wasn't dealing with ghosts.

But there was something unusual going on.

She waited until her hallway and the hallway in the mirror were clear of any people before she hurried to the mirror. She took the gum out of her mouth and got ready to pin her message to the mirror when her hands went through it.

She shrieked and pulled the paper and gum back toward her.

What had just happened?

Had her hands really gone through the mirror?

She shook her head. This was impossible. No one's hands could go through a mirror.

Unless what they were looking at wasn't a mirror.

After a moment, she brought her hand up to the wall next to the object and touched it. It seemed solid. She hesitated then knocked on it. Yes, it was a regular wall, all right.

Her gaze went to the mirror.

Which wasn't a mirror.

No mirror on this world would allow her hands to go through it.

Her hands hadn't gone through the mirror when she took the sheet down.

Did you actually touch the mirror when you removed the sheet?

She thought back to that evening, and she didn't think she touched the mirror itself. She had touched the sides of it, but not the mirror.

She inspected the frame holding the object that she had mistaken for a mirror. It was pressed firmly against the wall. There wasn't even a sliver of space between it and the wall.

She glanced behind her, reassured when no one was standing in the hall with her. Then she directed her attention back to the other hall.

What was she looking at? A different dimension? A parallel universe? A portal into another world?

Ignoring her apprehension, she brought her hand up to the thing and gently pushed her hand forward. It went through the barrier. This time, she noticed the pink and purple ripples that went from her hand to the edges of the object. The ripples stopped at the frame.

How odd. She'd seen pink and purple ripples at the barrier that prevented her from crossing the bridge, too.

She pulled her hand back and took a deep breath. She didn't know what this meant, but she was sure it was significant.

She wasn't brave enough to do anything else with the object than what she'd already done, so she decided to do the same thing the man had done and took a chair from her bedroom so she could set her message on it.

She used the gum to pin the message to the chair so he could read it. Then she took a step away from it and waited to see if he would appear.

After a half hour of nothing happening, she sighed. She didn't feel like standing here all day and waiting for something that might—or might not—happen. Now that she was sure there was no one on this side of the house, she could rest assured that she was safe here. He had written that he was unable to cross the barrier separating them. Judging by the way he wasn't in here with her right now when he could be, she felt much better.

She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans then decided to get something to eat.

Julian held off on checking the painting-like object in the hallway. He was scared nothing would be different about it. He'd spent so many mornings hoping something would change, and after every single morning revealing that every single thing was the same, he was afraid to hope that this morning might be different.

It was still June 17. When his valet had come to see if he wanted help getting dressed, Julian had asked him what day it was, and the

valet had told him.

June 17, 1817.

Again.

Julian took his time getting ready for the day. When he couldn't think of anything else to do to delay the inevitable, he took a step out into the hall and took a tentative look at the painting-like object. His chair was still in front of it, just as it'd been last night when he went to bed. He had expected that since he'd placed it there at two in the morning. But…he thought he saw something different in the other hall.

His heart leapt with a spark of excitement, and he hurried over to it.

Yes! There was something different from what he'd seen yesterday! Right in front of him was a different chair. He recognized that chair. It was the same one that was in the bedchamber adjoining his. On the chair was a message.

He leaned forward so he could read it.

I read your message. How is it possible you're on the other side of this mirror?

Mirror? Had the lady not inspected this object close enough to realize it wasn't a mirror? Even this morning, he couldn't see his reflection in it. But to be sure, he put his hand right up to the glass and waved. He didn't see his hand waving back at him. There wasn't even a trace of his fingers visible on the other side.

Well, that didn't matter. What mattered was that she'd been able to read his message and she had written back. He didn't know what this meant, except that it was different, and anything different was good.

He hurried back to the small room in his bedchamber and wrote her another message.

Please don't be afraid of me. I am Julian Azazel, the earl of this estate.

This isn't a mirror. I can only see things in your hallway through this object. It seems to be a doorway. I have touched it, and it's solid. It feels like glass. I am unable to pass through it.

Tell me, what is the date over there? I want to know the month, the day, and the year. I've been trapped in June 17, 1817 for two centuries. Every day since the first June 17, 1817 dawned, I've been in the same day.

Is the same true for you? Are you stuck in the same day? Or do your days change?

And if you don't mind my asking, who are you?

He knew it was a lengthy message, but he had no guarantee he'd be able to communicate with her again. He left his bedchamber and

replaced this message with the old one.

Then, since he had nothing to do, he grabbed the chair from the bedchamber adjoining his and set it in the hallway.

"My lord," the butler said as he approached him, "it's time to eat."

"Bring it up here," Julian replied. "I plan to spend the day up here. You can bring all of my meals to me." Recalling the fact that the butler always dropped the afternoon refreshments, he added, "I won't be taking tea and crumpets at 1:30 today."

The butler nodded. "As you wish, my lord."

Julian sat in the chair and waited to see what would happen next.

Chapter Eight

When Willow finished breakfast, she touched all of the mirrors she could find on the first floor. She pulled back sheets in rooms where the furniture was covered, too. She even went to the trouble of testing the windows. There was nothing out of place on the first floor.

But there was something out of place upstairs. She knew there was one mirror that wasn't what it seemed. Were there other openings into other parallel universes or dimensions or…or…whatever?

She spent a few minutes debating whether or not she should take a knife upstairs with her, just in case those men on the other side were dangerous, but in the end, she opted to go upstairs without one. Her gut didn't tell her they were dangerous.

Her gaze went to the mirror as soon as she entered the hallway. She noticed the young man right away. Upon closer inspection, she guessed he was around her age. That was unlike the other man she'd seen earlier that morning. This man was sitting in a different chair from the one that had been set in front of the mirror.

She stopped and took a moment to gather her bearings. She had nothing to worry about on this side of the mirror. That man wasn't in her hallway. She could only see him in the mirror. It was strange to see her reflection looking back at her as well. It looked as if she was on the other side with him. She glanced at the amount of sunlight filtering in through her window, but when she looked at the mirror, it appeared as if the hallway in the mirror wasn't as bright. Also, there were two chairs in the mirror and only one in her hallway. So there were several differences between this side of the mirror and that one.

The thing couldn't be a mirror. She had to stop thinking of it as one.

The man slowly rose to his feet as if he was afraid she'd run off. She directed her attention back to him. Was it true? Was he really unable to get into her hallway? Had it been wise not to at least bring the knife up, just in case her intuition was wrong?

She glanced behind her. She was still alone on this side of the mirror.

She turned her gaze back to the portal. The man didn't approach her. All he did was gesture to the message he had left for her in the chair in front of him.

Well, if all he wanted was for her to read something, she could do that.

She released her breath and walked forward. She had to get close to the portal in order to read the message on the paper that was propped up in the chair.

Please don't be afraid of me. I am Julian Azazel, the earl of this estate.

This isn't a mirror. I can only see things in your hallway through this object. It seems to be a doorway. I have touched it, and it's solid. It feels like glass. I am unable to pass through it.

Tell me, what is the date over there? I want to know the month, the day, and the year. I've been trapped in June 17, 1817 for two centuries. Every day since the first June 17, 1817 dawned, I've been in the same day.

Is the same true for you? Are you stuck in the same day? Or do your days change?

And if you don't mind my asking, who are you?

That was a lot to digest. She didn't know if she could adequately address everything he had written. On the surface, the whole thing seemed absurd. But given all that was happening, it had to be real.

Okay. As long as she didn't panic, she should be fine.

She looked up from the message and saw that he hadn't moved from the other chair. That had to mean he was giving her time to get used to him.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

His eyebrows furrowed.

"Can you hear me?" she asked, this time in a louder voice.

He pointed to his ears and shook his head. Then, after a moment, he moved his mouth in a way that let her know he was talking.

She shook her head and pointed to her ears to let him know she couldn't hear him, either. That made sense, now that she thought about it. Though she had seen him and the other man, she hadn't heard anything.

She glanced back at the message he had written. Turning her gaze back to him, she motioned for him to stay where he was, just in case he could cross the barrier that separated them. When he didn't move, she hurried to her bedroom and grabbed her notebook and pen. She returned to the hallway, glad when she saw that he hadn't come after her.

Okay. That helped her trust him more than she had before.

She went up to the portal and reread his message. She decided to answer the questions one by one.

Today is June 17, but the year is different. She wrote down the year. *Yesterday was June 16. Tomorrow should be June 18. Every day for me has been different.*

She glanced up at him and studied him. He had written that he was Julian Azazel and that he owned the estate. Upon closer inspection, he did look like the man in the portrait that was in the sitting room. He had the same dark blond hair and vintage clothing,

though it was a different outfit he wore today. She hadn't been able to tell his eye color before, but it was a deep brown color, and there was nothing lifeless about his eyes now. He was living and breathing right in front of her. She had thought he was attractive before. He was much more so when he wasn't just a painting.

She shook her head. What was she thinking? She was looking at someone who was supposed to be dead! He was supposed to be long gone and buried somewhere.

But no one did find his body.

She shivered. This was eerie. If someone had told her that coming to England was going to result in this, she would have stayed in the US.

Since he kept staring at her expectantly, she forced her attention back to his message. After rereading it, she wrote, *You've been dead for a long time. I just inherited this estate from Greg Westmore. I don't remember if the lawyer said he was an earl or not. I never spoke to Greg. I didn't even know he was a distant relative until two months ago when the lawyer contacted me.* She paused then added, *I'm Willow Knudson.*

She read what she had just written then figured this was enough for the moment. She went up to the barrier and held the notebook up so he could read what she'd written.

He walked over to her, and she had to fight back the urge to step away from him. When he reached the barrier, his gaze went to the paper.

His gaze went back to hers, and she subconsciously tightened her grip on the pen…hoping he really couldn't reach out and grab her.

He held his hand up in a gesture that indicated he wanted her to wait and then went to one of the bedrooms on his side of the hall.

She released her breath. She hadn't even been aware she'd stopped breathing while he was standing right in front of her.

He returned a minute later with a piece of paper. He came up to her and held it up so she could read it.

It's possible you'll wake up tomorrow and find that it's June 17th again. You need to leave this estate and get far away from here before the day is over. You don't want to end up like me.

She blinked in surprise. She hadn't considered that she might end up repeating the same day over and over like he had all of these years.

Had he really been stuck in 1817 all this time? She took a good look at his clothes. They looked a lot like the ones he'd been wearing in that portrait, except he didn't have that white cloth wrapped around his neck. His pants had buttons instead of a zipper. He also wore boots that reached his knees, and the tops of them were turned down. She couldn't recall ever seeing boots like that. His shirt had frilly material at the wrists. His hair style was also different. While it

was neatly trimmed, he had sideburns. They didn't go as far down as what the men had worn in the 1970s, but they reminded her of that decade in the US where people didn't seem to know what the heck good fashion was.

If he looked odd to her, she wondered how she must look to him. She didn't think women in his time wore a t-shirt and jeans.

She forced her attention back to his message and wrote a response. *It's too late. I can't leave. I haven't been able to leave since I arrived here. There's an invisible barrier at the moat. Everyone else can come and go.*

He read her message then went back to his bedroom. He returned soon with a reply. *Did the footman bring you a missive yesterday?*

What in the world was a footman? What was a missive? She shrugged to let him know she didn't know what he was asking.

He returned to his bedroom and came back out. *A piece of paper like this. Yesterday, did you get something like this but with something warning you that tomorrow will be the same as today?*

She wrote, *No*, on her piece of paper and showed it to him.

Though a part of him seemed relieved, another part also seemed cautious. She had no idea what to make of that reaction.

After a moment, she wrote, *You can't come through the barrier?*

He shook his head and put his hand up to the barrier. She jerked away, but within an instant, she realized his palm was resting flat on the surface of it. There were no ripples of pinks and purples.

I think I can go through it, she wrote.

Not sure if it was a wise idea or not, she placed her hand out to the barrier and lightly touched it. The ripples went through the barrier, and she pushed her hand forward. It didn't hurt, but it did feel strange.

This time, he was the one who jerked back.

She inspected her hand that was in his hallway. She wiggled her fingers. She felt fine, but there was a soft electric sensation that was coursing through her. She pulled her hand back and studied it. The electric sensation was gone. She wiggled her fingers again. Everything looked and felt normal.

Her gaze went back to Julian who touched the space her hand had just gone through, but he was unable to do the same thing she had done.

She bent down and pushed her hand through the barrier. Again, the ripples trickled across the barrier and the same electric feeling crept up her arm and vibrated through her body.

Could this be magic she was dealing with?

With her hand still through the barrier, she slowly straightened up. The electric sensation was still there, and this time, pink and purple ripples sparked.

It had to be magic.

She pulled her hand back over to her side and wrote down, *I think this is magic*, on her notebook.

Her gaze turned back to him, and she saw that he was trying to find a place on the barrier where he could penetrate it. But he couldn't. To him, this thing was as solid as an actual mirror.

Why could she go through it, but he couldn't?

Could it have something to do with the fact that he has been stuck in 1817 all of this time?

She wished she knew what to make of this. This barrier was a portal that seemed to be keeping him trapped in time.

She gasped. Mr. Thompson had said that Julian and the servants all disappeared and no one could explain why. When Julian's cousin came out to check on him, he hadn't found anyone here. What if his cousin had been on this side of the barrier where time was still moving forward?

But his cousin had been able to leave this property. In fact, everyone but her had been able to leave this property. No one had inhabited this place for more than a month or two. Mr. Thompson hadn't reported any other stories about people who went missing. And when he came out here, he'd been able to see her. She hadn't disappeared.

Forcing her attention back to Julian, she decided she'd have to tell him. She began writing the words out, but it was going to take too long to do all of that. It would be easier to talk to him.

She took another look at the barrier. The thing was tall enough for her to go through. She set the notebook and pen on the chair. She gestured for Julian to take the chair directly in front of him and put it away from the barrier.

Though he seemed confused, he did as she wished. She tested the barrier with her foot. Her foot went through it without any problems.

Okay. She could do this. It was just like walking through a doorway.

Squeezing her eyes tight, she stepped through the barrier. Electric currents swept through her, but they left as soon as they came. She opened her eyes once both of her feet were on the other side of the barrier.

"How did you do that?" Julian asked, his eyes wide.

"I just stepped through it," she replied as she checked her body. Everything seemed to be in place. She felt and looked like she normally did. "It's a time portal. I think magic is making it work."

"Well, if it did, it doesn't seem to be working anymore." He gestured behind her.

She turned and saw that her side of the hallway had vanished. All

she could see was what was directly in this hallway, including her and Julian.

"No!" She tried to get back through the barrier, but she hit hard glass. She rubbed her nose. That hurt!

"I can't see your side anymore," he said as he tapped the glass. "Before, I couldn't see myself in here, but I can now."

The thing began to let off a pink glow that turned purple. He took her by the arm and pulled her away from it. Before she had time to process what was happening, the glass began to crack. She stumbled further back from it and hit one of the chairs. The thing glowed more brightly as more and more cracks crisscrossed across the glass.

Julian led her to one of the bedrooms right before the glass exploded into many pieces across the hallway. She let out a shriek and buried her face in his shoulder. He held her until both of them could be assured that it was safe to go back into the hallway.

As she began to follow him, she realized this was her bedroom on the other side of the barrier. She stopped in shock and studied it. She recognized the furniture, except everything looked as if they hadn't been used in quite a while. The bed was neatly made. Also, there were no lamps, and her suitcase was gone. She went further into the room and saw that what had been the bathroom was a room with a small bed, a desk, and a chair.

This was really happening. She had stepped back in time. She was in 1817.

"That thing is destroyed," Julian said as he walked over to her. "I'm sorry. If I had thought you weren't going to be able to get back, I would have told you not to come over to my side of the hallway."

Wondering what he meant by the word *destroyed*, she hurried back to the hallway. There were so many pieces of glass on the floor that cleaning this up was going to be a nightmare. In the larger pieces, she saw her reflection. She picked up one of the larger pieces and turned it over. It was nothing but a black surface. She checked another piece and saw the same thing. It was like any other mirror she'd come across in her life.

Glad she had thought to put on her sneakers, she stepped over the glass and walked over to the place where the barrier had been on the wall. The frame was splintered, and half of it was on the floor. The area she had just stepped through was now just a part of the wall.

She touched it and then touched another part of the wall. Both sections felt exactly the same.

It had to be magic. She couldn't think of any other way to explain this. She turned back to him, noting that he looked as overwhelmed as she felt. "Are there any other things like this on your side of the mansion?"

His eyebrows furrowed. “Do you mean Nightingale Hall?”

Recalling that was what Mr. Thompson had called it, she nodded.

“No, that was the only…strange object in this place. But I can’t leave here, and the same day keeps repeating itself. Don’t ask me why. I have no idea. It’s been like this ever since I first woke up on June 17 over two centuries ago.”

She released her breath. She wondered if that meant she was going to be trapped in the same loop of time he was, too.

Chapter Nine

"Even though I've been trapped in the same day for two centuries, I haven't been up here for as long as I can remember," Julian said an hour later.

Willow followed him into the attic. She had expected the room to be small, but this thing was larger than her apartment. Mr. Thompson hadn't even showed her this particular room, but then, why would he? It wasn't a main feature in a place so large that one had all the space they needed. If she had gone up here in her time, she wondered if she would have seen it exactly as it was right now. Some items were draped to protect them from dust, but there were several trunks that didn't have anything covering them.

"I'm sure this is where the maid put my mother's clothes." Julian headed over to the trunk by the small window.

Willow wasn't all that comfortable with the idea of wearing a deceased woman's clothes, but given how startled the maid and butler had been to see her after they hurried up to the stairs to see what had caused the loud noise, she agreed with Julian that it'd be best if she wore the same clothes women in this time period did.

She could only imagine what the butler and maid thought she and Julian had been doing up here. They had both averted their gazes from her and apologized for catching her in a "state of undress". She'd waited for Julian to explain that nothing inappropriate had been going on between them, but he'd only told them to clean up the shards of glass that were all over the hallway. She supposed in light of everything that was happening, it didn't matter. They had bigger problems to tackle anyway.

She went to the window and saw that it was raining. She hadn't just stepped back in time where all of the modern conveniences were gone; the weather was different on this morning, too. It'd been sunny on her side of the barrier. She also noticed that the gazebo wasn't purple; it was pink.

She scanned the attic and saw a window on the wall facing the front of the property. She hurried over to it and saw the familiar path leading to the bridge and moat. Instead of pavement, the path had carriage tracks that led from the front of the mansion down to the bridge. There were no shrubs. As for the trees lining what had once been the road that went past the bridge… Those looked as if they'd just been planted. They wouldn't create any shade for the person going up or down that dirt path for a long time.

It was strange to know what this place was going to look like many years from now. Shivering, she forced her attention back to Julian

who was sorting through the clothes in one of the trunks.

"Do you have any idea who might want to curse you?" she asked as she approached him. "Do you have an enemy?"

"All gentlemen have their share of enemies," he replied with a glance in her direction. "I did win a significant amount of money in a wager that was placed at a gentleman's club. Gentlemen don't like losing money."

"Did this gentleman come after you with some kind of spell?"

He laughed. "A spell? As in an enchantment?"

Surprised he should take this particular stance against the idea, she said, "It seems to me that someone who spent two centuries living out the same day would be open to the idea of spells. You have been living under some kind of curse for all of these years."

His laughter died down, and a worried frown crossed his face. "I was hoping for a more logical explanation."

"Like what?"

He thought for a moment then shrugged. "I don't know." Then he turned back to the trunk.

"This place isn't normal. There's been nothing normal about it for a long time." Recalling what Mr. Thompson had told her, she continued, "No one down the line of your family tree has been able to sell this place, and that includes me. Every time I tried to write my signature on the contract to let the lawyer sell it, the ink wouldn't work."

He retrieved a few gowns and slippers. He stood up and focused on her. "I have no children. There was no heir for me to leave this estate to. My family line is suspended in time with me. The next gentleman to inherit the estate is my cousin." He paused. "I suppose he acquired the version of the estate that continued on without me. He was due to marry. He probably had an heir. You must come from his line."

"I'm not sure about that. There was a cousin who came out here to check on you, and you and the servants weren't anywhere." She hesitated to add the rest, but he should know the truth. If it was her, she'd want to know what happened, even if it was gruesome. "No one knew what happened to you and the servants. Some said you killed everyone before running off. But others said your cousin killed everyone."

"I have two cousins. Francis is the oldest and his brother Phillip is the youngest. They would never harm anyone. In fact, Francis and I are very good friends. As for Phillip, he's only five. He's not old enough to kill anyone."

Francis. That name was familiar. She remembered Mr. Thompson saying it. She winced. Since Julian was friends with Francis, he wasn't going to like knowing what happened to him.

“What is it?” Julian asked. “Did something terrible happen to him? Did he disappear, too?”

“No, he didn’t disappear,” she slowly said. “But when you didn’t return to London, he came here looking for you. Only, he didn’t find you. He didn’t even find the servants. He said everyone at this place disappeared. No one believed him. He was convicted of murdering you and the servants.” She took a deep breath and forced out, “They hanged him.”

“They did what?!”

She jerked at his sharp tone.

He took a moment to compose himself then said, “Francis was supposed to marry Lady Kimberly. When I left London, he was planning his wedding. I was supposed to be there to celebrate the marriage with him.” In a whisper, he added, “He’d never been happier.”

Noting the pain in his voice, she had to look away from him. She didn’t know what she could say or do to lessen the impact of her words. When Mr. Thompson told her about Julian’s cousin, it’d been like reading a news headline. While the events were tragic, it hadn’t affected her. But talking with Julian made it real. She shivered and hugged herself in a protective gesture.

“I have to warn him not to come,” Julian said. He gave her the clothes and slippers. “Try these on and see how they fit. The maid can alter them if needed. I have to send out a missive.”

She hurried after him as he bounded down the attic steps. “Do you think it’s going to do any good?”

“I don’t know, but I have to do something. I can’t let Francis die.”

“If the same day repeats itself over and over, he’ll never get it.”

They reached the bottom of the staircase, and he turned to her. “You came here from the future. That’s never happened before. You’re different. That has to mean when I wake up tomorrow, it’ll finally be June 18.”

“What if you wake up and it’s still June 17?”

“I don’t know what I’ll do if that happens. All I can do is hope that you coming here means time will move forward for me again.”

He headed down the hall that led to the bedrooms, and she followed him. The glass had been cleaned up on the floor. She took another look at the wall where the barrier between their time periods had been and saw that the barrier hadn’t returned. It probably wasn’t going to return. For some reason, its sole purpose seemed to be bringing her into the nineteenth century.

But why? What made her so special?

She followed Julian to his bedroom and took a peek into it while he ran to a small room off to the side of it. His bedroom was large like

hers, and he had a large canopied bed, but the bedding was a gold color. The drapes were gold, too. The drapes hadn't been there in the future. They had been removed. The bed had been covered with a sheet, so she hadn't seen the matching blankets and sheets. There was even a rug at the side of the bed that was gold.

She noted the dresser with a razor, a bowl, a comb, and other items spread out across it. Next to the dresser was a tall oak structure that made her think of those things people from the old-fashioned time period put dresses and suits in. She was sure there was a term for those things, but whatever it was, she couldn't think of it. Mr. Thompson had told her what it was, too, when he gave her a tour of the place. Now the nightstand by his bed was familiar, but instead of a lamp, there was a small candelabra. He also had a fireplace not too far from the bed, though, given that it was summer, it wasn't currently being used.

She went into the bedroom and went to the small room. At the moment, Julian was sitting at a desk and writing something with what looked like one of those feathered pens she'd only seen in the movies.

She glanced back at the clothes in her arms and decided she might as well see how well they fit her, if they fit at all. She didn't know what she was going to do if they didn't. It wasn't like she'd brought her suitcase with her.

When she entered her bedroom, she shut the door and put the clothes on the bed. She frowned. Something else was different about this room. It wasn't just that she no longer had a private bathroom or lamps.

She took a step back and scanned the room. It took her a few seconds, but she realized the color of her bedding and the canopy part of the bed were no longer purple. They were a deep red color. The drapes at the window were also red.

Maybe it meant nothing, but something tickling in the back of her mind told her that this was somehow important.

Recalling the door that had been sealed shut in the room in her time, she went to it and turned the knob. This time it opened. She peered into the other room and saw that she was looking at Julian's bedroom. Was this also significant, or did one of her ancestors want to seal the door so someone in the other room wouldn't barge in on them?

But if the person didn't want someone barging into the room, why not just put a lock on the door?

With a shake of her head, she shut the door and went back to the bed. She sorted through the three gowns and decided to try on the short-sleeved white and peach one with the pretty frills lining the bottom of it. After she removed the clothes she put on that morning,

she slipped the gown over her head and pulled it down.

When she wore dresses in the past, she'd always picked ones that reached the top of her knees. This gown reached just above her ankles. The waistline was much higher than what she was used to. The waistline was just under her breasts, and this made them far more noticeable than any of her shirts and dresses ever did. While plenty of women in her time showed off their cleavage, she hadn't been one of them. Quite frankly, she felt way too exposed. But what could she do about it? It wasn't like she could slip the t-shirt on without looking out of place.

She rolled her eyes. She *was* out of place.

Resisting the urge to put the t-shirt on, she sorted through the other items and pulled out the piece of clothing Julian had called stockings and slipped them on. She would look ridiculous wearing her sneakers with a gown, so she sorted through the shoes he had given her. She found a pair that matched her gown. They reminded her of ballerina slippers, except she wouldn't have to stand on her toes to wear them. She put them on and wiggled her toes. They were a little tight. She walked in them and was glad to note the extra room along the square toe-line made it comfortable enough to walk in.

She went to the mirror above the vanity and checked her reflection. The gown was a little loose in places, but for the most part, it worked just fine. She might be able to pull off this whole "dress up like a woman from the past" thing.

Her gaze went to her ponytail. She wondered if Julian's mother had any combs in that trunk. The ponytail looked fine with what she had been wearing before. It really didn't fit this kind of dress. She supposed she was stuck with the ponytail right now, but at some point, she was going to have to take care of her hair.

She gasped. Another thought occurred to her, and this one was more pressing than when she could style her hair to fit this time period. Just where was she supposed to go to the bathroom? The bathroom that had once been attached to her bedroom was gone. She couldn't very well answer nature's call when she was at the desk in the small room.

She was going to have to ask Julian about this. As far as she was concerned, this had just become the most important issue she had to address. Once this matter was settled, she could worry about everything else.

Chapter Ten

I can't explain why, but you must stay away from Nightingale Hall. For the sake of our friendship, stay in London even if I never return.

Julian reread the warning he had written. He was tempted to add more, but it was probably best he keep the missive short. The only thing that mattered was that Francis stayed in London. As long as he did that, the future would be altered so that his dear friend wouldn't hang.

He dipped the quill into the inkwell and addressed the missive. He had no way of knowing if Francis would ever receive this, but he had to try.

He had just sealed the missive when Willow came in through his bedchamber and entered the small room. He tried not to stare at her like a gentleman who'd never seen a lady before. He had members of the fairer sex in this manor, so it wasn't like he hadn't been around them for all of these centuries. But they were maids.

Willow was different. She had inherited the estate in her time. That made her his equal in station. Also, none of the maids in the estate had curves as lovely as Willow did, nor did they have Willow's natural beauty. She looked much better in a gown than in those strange clothes she'd had on before.

When he realized she was talking, he forced his gaze off of her breasts and directed his attention to her face. He could only pray she didn't know what had been going through his mind just now. It wasn't the slightest bit gentlemanly.

"The small room off to my bedroom isn't what it was in my time," she said. "There's no toilet or shower in there. I have no idea what toilets are called in this time, and I don't know where they are in a place this big. At the risk of sounding crude, where do you relieve your bladder around here?"

It took him a moment to figure out what she was talking about. "Oh, right." He rose to his feet and picked the missive off the desk. "I'll summon the maid to bring a chamber pot to your bedchamber."

She frowned. "A chamber pot?"

"That's what we use in this time." He figured it was probably similar to a toilet, given the subject of the conversation. "The chamber maid will place it by the bed. When you take care of things, you do it in there, and she'll empty it out when you're away from your room. You have nothing to worry about. She's discreet."

"Don't you have some other way of doing this?"

"This is the most efficient method we have. You could go to the small building outside, but usually the gardener and stablemaster use

that. I recommend the chamber pot. It's more private, and it's inside." He noted the way she shuddered and chuckled. "I don't know what the inconvenience is. It's not like you spend all day relieving your bladder. The task is really just a small and insignificant part of the day."

"It's more complicated for me because I'm a woman. I can't just stand and go anywhere I want."

Amused, he said, "I don't go just anywhere. I'm not an animal."

She groaned. "I didn't mean it like that. I just mean that if you wanted to, you could pick a bush and let it go."

"I've never done anything of the sort. I'm an earl, not a vagabond. I either use my chamber pot or, if I'm outside, the privy."

She didn't seem completely convinced but nodded as if she intended for him to think he had proven his point.

Well, he didn't know what else he could say on this topic, nor was he exactly inclined to discuss this at great length when he had more important things to tend to.

"I have to send this missive to my cousin," he said. "After that, I'll make sure you get a chamber pot, and then we'll get something to eat. I assume you eat in the future."

She blinked in surprise. "Of course, I eat. Everyone needs to eat."

"Do you eat at a table while sitting in a chair?"

"Is there a different way to eat?"

He couldn't help but smile at her bewildered tone. "I didn't think so, but I didn't think the matter of a chamber pot would shock you as much as it did. It's nice to know that everything in this time won't offend you." He waved for her to join him, and they left the room. "We walk up and down stairs, too."

She smirked. "There are some stairs that move in the future. They're called escalators. But, I will admit, these are in places like airports and malls. You won't find them in homes, even in ones as fancy as this."

Intrigued, he asked, "Really?"

"Yep. And there are elevators that move you from one floor to another. It goes up and down, and it's in the shape of a rectangular box."

"Are these all run by magic?"

"No, they move by cables that are similar to rope."

That was fascinating. "What other things do you have in the future that isn't in this time?"

"Electricity," she replied as they reached the stairs. "You don't need to light candles there. You just flip a switch on a wall or turn the knob on a lamp, and the whole room lights up."

"Do they work better than candles?"

“Much better. With candles, you have to light a lot of them to get the whole room lit up, but it only takes one lightbulb to do it.”

“I wish I could see that.”

“Unless there’s a portal around here to go to the future, I don’t think that will be possible.”

The butler approached them as they reached the bottom of the staircase.

“Is the coachman done checking on the carriage?” Julian asked him. It’d been a long time since he had gone outside to see what was going on around the manor. He couldn’t remember what the coachman did this time of the day.

“I believe he’s still doing that,” the butler replied.

The butler glanced at Willow as if he wasn’t sure what to think about having her there without being introduced to her at the front entrance of the house. Julian was sure the butler assumed he had snuck her in here during the middle of the night to engage in all kinds of wanton behavior, but, being a servant, he kept his thoughts to himself.

“Do you wish to go with Miss Knudson to London?” the butler asked.

“No,” Julian replied. “I want the coachman to go to London and deliver this to Mr. Francis Azazel. His address is on the envelope.”

The butler took the missive. “I’ll take this to him. Is there anything you would have me do before I go?”

“Yes, tell the maids that they are to get the bedchamber adjoining mine ready for Miss Knudson’s stay here.”

The butler didn’t seem all that enthusiastic with the idea, but he said he would do as instructed then headed down the hall.

Willow’s eyebrows furrowed. “Am I imagining it, or does he want me gone?”

Julian took her by the elbow and led her to the drawing room. “He thinks you’re my lover, and you’ve come here for a secret affair.”

She gasped.

He grinned. “I don’t know what they’d think of this in the future, but it does look sordid. You came here out of nowhere, and you have no chaperone.”

“Why would I need a chaperone? I’m twenty-five, not a child.”

“In this time, every unmarried lady does well to have a chaperone when she’s in the company of a gentleman who’s not a relative.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Well, besides the whole chamber pot thing.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. It’s just the way things are in this

time."

"I have a lot to learn," she said under her breath.

He supposed he would be saying the same thing if he had crossed into her time. Imagine moving stairs, a switch that brightened rooms without the aid of candles, things called toilets, and ladies wearing breeches as if they were gentlemen.

He escorted her to the drawing room and gestured for her to sit on the settee. He walked over to the cord that was on the wall and pulled it. "Do you drink tea in the future?"

"Once in a while, but I mostly stick to coffee or juice," she replied as she sat down.

"Coffee. That's an American drink, isn't it?"

"I'm from America."

That explained why she sounded strange when she talked. He'd thought it was just something that happened to people's voices when they were in the future, but if she was from another country, she would sound different even if she'd been born in this time.

"Does America have a good relationship with Great Britain in the future?" he asked as he went over to her.

"Yes. We're allies."

He settled beside her. "Our countries don't get along so well in this time. We just came out of a war with your country."

"I didn't know there was a war in this time. I thought the Revolutionary War was the only one America had with Great Britain. That's the one where we fought for our independence in the 1700s."

"Yes, I'm aware of that war, but I mean the one where Great Britain was trying to defeat Napoleon. Napoleon posed a great threat to all of Europe. I don't think those of you in America realized just how serious things were over here. He had to be stopped. But while we were doing our best to stop him, America felt it necessary to declare another war on us. I'm just glad that everything with Napoleon is over." He glanced her way. "It did end with him at Waterloo, didn't it?"

"I don't know much about the history of Europe, but Napoleon never took over all of Europe."

Good. At least there was one good thing that had happened in the future. All he had to do was prevent Francis from coming out here. Then, if tomorrow did end up repeating itself, he could rest knowing the coachman was able to get off of this property today. It seemed like everyone who wasn't on this land was able to move forward in time. That gave him hope.

"Well, in my time, our countries get along very well, and we also get along with France," Willow said.

His eyes widened. "We do?"

She nodded. “It all worked out in the end.”

He wondered how that was possible after so much fighting. He’d been sure that the tension between the countries, especially France, would always be there.

A maid came into the room, and Julian rose to his feet to tell her to bring in some tea and scones. After she left, he returned to the settee.

“Have you had scones?” he asked.

“No,” Willow said.

“It’s a pastry with fruit in the middle and sugar sprinkled on top. If I don’t ask for a change in fruit, Cook picks blueberry. I hope that’s all right.”

“I like blueberries.”

“I do, too, though over the years, I’ve gotten tired of them. But since Cook makes them best with blueberries, I thought you would enjoy those.”

“That’s nice of you to pick blueberries for that reason,” she said with a smile.

He returned her smile. It was nice to have someone he could have a real conversation with. With the servants, it had been like dealing with actors who were put on a stage with certain lines to say. He’d never developed a connection with any of them. Willow, however, was different. And different was very nice.

“I know the last thing you ever wanted was to be stuck here with me, but I’m glad you’re here,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “I realize it’s selfish of me to say that. I should be doing everything I can to find a way to get you back to your time instead of keeping you here to have tea and scones with me.” Not to mention getting a bedchamber set up just for her.

“I already searched the entire place. There is no other portal. Everything else I could see my reflection in was normal. I couldn’t put my hand through anything except that strange mirror in the hall.”

“It’s funny that you saw a mirror and all I saw was something that made me think of a painting. For the longest time, I thought it was a painting of a white sheet. It wasn’t until the other day that I saw my own hallway. I couldn’t see my reflection or the reflection of any of the servants. Now I realize that was because I was looking into the hallway in your time. We didn’t exist there.”

“Yeah, the whole thing is so strange,” she said. “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“It was a great error on my part, but I’m sure the missive I burned in the fireplace has something to do with all of this.”

“Missive?”

“A message. I haven’t read it since June 16, 1817. It came in the

evening. At the time, I didn't think it was important, so I threw it in the fireplace."

"That's a long time ago."

"If it had occurred to me that I'd be stuck in an endless loop forever, I would have written down what was in it the second day I woke up and it was still June 17." He shook his head. "I didn't even think there might be a connection between all of this and that missive, but now I'm certain there was."

"Did all of the missive burn?"

"Enough so that I can't make out anything that will help me."

A thoughtful expression came over her face before she asked, "So there are fragments from the missive still left?"

He nodded. "The fragments are there. I can take them out, and they'll return there before I wake up the next morning. Everything goes back to being the way it was on the original day I woke up on June 17. I can destroy everything in this room, and tomorrow when I wake up, it'll look like this. Though," he amended, "that might change now that you're here. I'm not sure what your arrival means."

"If things are going to be different because I'm here, maybe something will be different with that missive. Maybe there will be some clue you didn't notice before."

Would it be possible? Could her being here change more than the day he'd wake up in tomorrow? Could it also change other things around here?

The maid came into the room with the tea and scones. He remained silent until she was gone.

"I burned the missive in the library," he said as he poured tea into their cups. "When we're done with this, we'll look in the fireplace."

After he gave her a cup and scone, she asked, "In the future, most of the rooms in this place have the furniture all covered up. This room wasn't one of them." She scanned the area. "It looks like all of the furniture is still here. The lawyer said everything was kept in its original condition as much as possible. I don't know if it was to give this place an old-fashioned appeal or if people were afraid to update things beyond the plumbing and lighting."

He suspected the plumbing had something to do with her earlier inquiry about where she could relieve her bladder but had no concept of how one might use anything but a chamber pot, so he decided not to ask about it. The lighting reference made more sense since he was familiar with candles.

"In my time this room is called a sitting room," she said.

"I call it a drawing room," he replied after he swallowed his tea. "But it makes sense why you call it a sitting room. We are sitting."

She chuckled then bit into the scone. "Do you draw in this room?"

“No. I’ve written missives on occasion, but I mostly use this room to entertain visitors. Not that any visitors have been here in two centuries. If I write, it’s in the library, but again, I haven’t needed to write anything in a very long time.”

She studied him, and he caught the sympathetic expression on her face. “What have you done all of this time?”

“Nothing, really. I’ve just been going from day to day and hoping that I’ll wake up and tomorrow will be June 18.”

“That’s awful. I would go crazy if that happened to me.” She took a deep breath. “I suppose I might find out what it’s like if tomorrow is June 17.”

“I hope it’s not. I hope it’ll be the 18th.”

“Me, too.”

He wasn’t sure she’d even be here if he did wake up tomorrow and find it was still the 17th, but he kept the thought to himself. He had to hope that tomorrow would be different because if it wasn’t, he might just give up.

They continued to eat and drink in silence.

Chapter Eleven

Willow stood back as Julian removed the screen from the fireplace. The library looked so different without all of the sheets covering everything. It looked far cozier than she had imagined.

Julian knelt in front of the fireplace and sorted through the debris. She joined him and searched through the ashes and remnants of wood for any pieces of paper she could find.

Something pink glowed at her. She turned her gaze to where Julian's fingers were. The pink was faint, but it was definitely glowing. "What's that?" she asked as she pointed to it.

He sorted through the area she had gestured to and picked up a small, burnt piece of paper. "It's part of the missive, but I've never seen it glow before."

Excited, she asked, "You can see it glowing?"

He nodded. "I can. I've handled these pieces many times, and I've never once seen them glow."

"What color do you see?"

"It's like the color of a pink rose."

"I see that color, too!" She leaned closer to him. "Is there anything on it?"

He tilted it so that it was in her direction. "It's part of a word. I can only make out *an*."

Bummer. She was hoping there was more than that. "Same here." She shouldn't be surprised. It was probably too much to ask for the missive to magically come back together so they could read the whole thing. She didn't dare voice the wish in case it got his hopes up. He'd already been through enough as it was.

"There are more pieces." He set the piece of paper down then resumed his search.

She followed his lead and dug through the ashes. A couple of times, her hand brushed his, and she had to make an effort to ignore the surge of pleasure the contact produced. She avoided eye contact with him in case he picked up on her excitement. He wasn't making a romantic gesture. If anything, this task wasn't the least bit romantic.

But, try as she might, being this close to him and accidentally touching him from time to time kept prompting her to think of romantic things she hadn't given thought to in a very long time.

It must be her years of solitude catching up to her. Sure, she had dated in the past, and she had been surrounded by people at her job. It wasn't like she was a total recluse. But she had been pretty much detached from any meaningful relationships. She hadn't even been aware of when she withdrew from most of the world around her. It'd

just been a natural progression after high school, she supposed.

Certainly, that would make her sensitive to being so close to a man, especially one as attractive and sweet as Julian was. She recalled the times she had studied his portrait in the future. She had been attracted to him, but, of course, with him being dead, her thoughts hadn't gone beyond the superficial flutter in her stomach. She never thought she'd actually meet him.

And having met him, she realized he wasn't stuffy and full of his self-importance like she assumed rich people were. She wouldn't have been surprised if Julian had turned out to be a bit of a jerk. But Julian wasn't turning out to be what she had expected.

When she realized she had stopped searching through the ashes, she hurried to get back to the task in case he figured out she was thinking about him.

In the end, she managed to find five pieces. Two had actual words on them: *father* and *bound*. When she checked the six pieces he had found, there was only one full word, and that was *duel*. All of the other pieces only had one to three letters on them.

"You don't know how many times I wished I hadn't destroyed this missive," he said in frustration.

"Well, maybe there's something here we can use." Willow collected the pieces and carried them to the desk. "Does anything bring back a memory?" As he joined her, she picked up the word that seemed to be the easiest to prod an old memory. "What about the word *duel*? That didn't happen often in your time, did it?"

"While some argue it's wrong, dueling does happen. Why? Don't you have duels in your time?"

"I don't recall anyone slapping someone with a glove and going out to a field to shoot him with a gun. Though," she added, "there are incidences where people fight each other until one of them dies." She shrugged. "I guess every time period will have violence. Some of it is just more formal than others." She glanced at the other two words. "I don't suppose *father* or *bound* brings up any memory when you think of the word *duel*?"

He rubbed his jaw, and after a long moment of silence, he finally said, "It happened a long time ago. It was before I was born. But, I recall my mother saying something about my father getting involved in a duel." His eyebrows furrowed. "Do you think there's a connection between that and the fact that I've been stuck here for two centuries?"

"At this point, I don't know what to think, but I wouldn't rule it out. We have to consider every option. There might be a clue somewhere that can help us figure out what's going on."

"All right." He sighed and crossed his arms. "In that case, let's say this curse we're under has something to do with a duel my father was

involved in. All I remember my mother saying about it was that my father was foolish to do it. I never talked to him about it. I don't know if he thought it was foolish or not. Maybe he regretted it. Maybe he didn't."

When he paused, she asked, "In a duel, doesn't one person die? This isn't something both people can walk away from, is it?"

"A gentleman doesn't always die, but a reputation can be ruined. That's why it goes against good moral judgement to get involved in it. If I had known the duel would lead to all of this, I would have asked my father about it." He picked up the piece of paper as if doing so would give him the answers he was looking for.

"We know your father lived. Do you know the person who dueled against him?"

"My mother didn't say."

Unfortunately, that didn't help. She bit her lower lip then asked, "Is there anything else your father did? Did he bind someone up?"

He laughed. "Bind someone up?"

"The word *bound* was in this letter." She gestured to the piece on the desk.

He stopped laughing. "I see why you asked that. No, he didn't bind anyone up and keep them a prisoner or anything like that. He stayed here for as long as I can remember. My mother and I went to London, but he stayed here. Once I was able to, I left here and had no intention of living here ever again. I only came here to take care of his funeral and to make sure the estate was in order. Little did I know that when I returned, I wasn't going to be able to leave."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Your father didn't leave. Could he leave?"

"I don't know. I assume so. He was never stuck in one endless day like I am."

"I wasn't stuck in one day, either, but I was unable to leave. Or at least I wasn't able to leave in my time." Who knew if she could leave now that she was in a different time?

"Do you think you can leave now that you're in my time?" Julian asked.

"I wasn't born in this time period. I shouldn't be here. So maybe whatever magic captured me in the future won't do it in this time."

His gaze went back to the pieces of the missive in front of him, and he tapped the desk as if he was debating something.

"Do you think we should go to the bridge and see if I can cross it?" she asked.

He hesitated to respond, but then, in a soft voice, he said, "If you can cross it, you might not be able to come back in."

She hadn't considered that possibility. Would it be a good idea to

cross over the magical barrier if she couldn't come back? She didn't know anyone in this time period, and she sure didn't belong here. "I can see if my hand will go through it. I don't have to step across it. I was able to put my hand through the time portal in the hallway and stay on my side." She glanced at the window. "Does the rain ever let up during this day?"

"About mid-afternoon, it will become a drizzle and then pick up again within a couple of hours."

If they were to test out the theory, then that would be a good time to do it. She turned her attention back to the pieces of paper. They were still giving off their pink glow. That had to be significant. "We should save these. There's something important about them."

"I agree." He scanned the room. "I can put them in here."

He went to a small box that was tucked away on one of the bookshelves. Her gaze went to the books. She recalled looking through them in her time. The binding had been faded, but they had been well-preserved. Curious, she walked over to them and took out one of the familiar ones. *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole.

She opened it. The pages were no longer crisp and yellow. They were easy to turn without the threat of ripping them.

Julian approached her with the small box. "Is there something about this book that is different from the others?"

She shook her head. "No. It's a book like any other. I just remember looking at this in my time. It was old by then. It's strange to see it looking so brand new." She glanced around the room. "Everything is newer in this time. It's strange to step back in time." And it was weird to know what the future of this place was going to be like.

"I enjoy that book immensely," he said. "Though, I've read it so much over the years that I don't want to ever read it again."

"What is it about?"

"A gentleman who is afraid he will lose the castle and lands he owns unless he has an heir. The book starts on the day of his son's wedding. His son dies when a helmet falls on him. As a result, he tries to marry the lady his son was supposed to marry so he can have an heir to carry on his family line, thereby keeping the castle and lands indefinitely."

"Does he succeed?"

His eyebrows rose. "If I told you that, it'd spoil the book."

"Who says I'm going to read it?" she asked.

"If you end up having to stay here, I recommend reading it. It's one of the best ever written."

"If I had wanted to read any of these books, I could have done so when I was in this library in the future. Old books don't appeal to

me."

"These books aren't old."

She shot him an amused look. "They are in my time. Old books are typically boring. I don't want to waste my time reading boring things."

"But this isn't boring. None of these are boring." He gestured to the books on the shelves. "In this time, they are relatively new. You ought to think of it that way. They might be more interesting to you."

"Yeah, but it doesn't have an attractive cover to make me interested in it. An attractive cover is important."

"What's important is that the story is good."

"The way a cover looks adds to the enjoyment of the story." She closed the book and put it back into the spot on the shelf.

"That cover is one of the best ever made. The binding on the book is perfect."

"That's not what I meant. This cover is plain. It's drab. There are no people or pretty scenery on it. If this book is about a castle, why can't there at least be a picture of a castle on it?"

He stared at her as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "That's absurd. You don't need a picture on a cover. The purpose of reading is to create the images in your mind."

"In this time, I realize that's what you have to do since the technology hasn't been developed to make books look pretty. But I've seen some awesome covers in my time, and once you've seen those, you can't go to books like this. It's just not possible."

"I'm sure it is possible. You just don't want to do it."

"The way something looks adds to its appeal. You, of all people, should understand that. I notice how much care and attention you put into this place." She turned to face him. "When I first arrived here, trees lined my path to the bridge, and once I crossed the bridge, there were tall shrubs that had been trimmed. Those things enhanced the beauty of this estate. The lawyer figured I'd have no trouble selling it because of its splendor."

His eyes grew wide. "Why would you want to sell this place?"

"Well, I'm not a citizen of this country. I'm a citizen of the United States. My home is back there." She paused. "Or it was back there. I'm not sure how being sucked into the past is going to change things." It was possible she was never going to go back. Forcing the thought aside, she added, "Also, I can't afford to run a place this huge. You had some money left in the estate, but it wasn't enough to get me through the rest of my life, and I only had $2,000 in my bank account. It wasn't like I was rich."

His gaze lowered to the box where he had placed the pieces of glowing paper. "It's a shame this estate was going to be sold. I had hoped that Francis would be able to have children who would keep it

in the family forever."

She winced. As she had imagined when she'd looked at his portrait in the future, he wasn't happy about her selling it. She felt even worse now that she'd gotten to know how nice he was. "I'm sorry. It's just out of my ability to keep it, and there was no one except for me to pass the estate to. I was the end of Phillip's line."

Looking as if she'd just told him he had no reason to keep living, he put the lid on the box and returned it to its spot on the shelf. She didn't know what she could say or do to lessen the impact of her words. She'd told him the truth. She was the last remaining person who was in Phillip's line. She realized most family trees kept expanding, but in Phillip's case, it hadn't. It was impossible for her to know why. Maybe it had something to do with the magic that bound her and Julian to this property.

She heard footsteps and turned her attention to the door. The butler came into the room and said it was time to eat.

Julian offered a nod and said, "We'll be there in a moment." He waited until the butler left before saying, "Maybe I changed the future when I sent the coachman out with the missive. I warned Francis not to come here. Maybe he'll stay in London so he won't be accused of murder and hang. Maybe he'll inherit the title and have children. Maybe this estate will stay in the family now."

She had no idea that a title was so important to the noble classes. She wondered if she should have kept her big mouth shut. Maybe it was best if she hadn't told him all that had happened. After a moment, she said, "I have no idea if sending Francis something will change anything or not, but it was worth a try. I would have done the same thing in your situation."

He let out a defeated sigh. "I don't know whether to hope in anything anymore. If I wake up tomorrow and it's June 17, 1817 and you're not here, then I'll know there is no hope. Francis will never get the missive. He'll hang. Philip will inherit everything, and in two centuries, it'll all be gone."

She wished she had just stuck to the topic of book covers. This conversation was getting much too depressing. Even if she had no emotional attachment to this estate, she hated to see how this was affecting him. "It's possible I wake up in this time with you," she said as she struggled to give him a reason to hope. "If that happens, then you'll know the future has changed from the one I was in."

"Yes, I suppose that would be true. It's also possible when you wake up, you'll be back in your time." His shoulders slumped. "If you do, stay there. Don't come through the portal. You don't want to live through the hell I've been through all of these years."

She bit her tongue so she wouldn't respond. She knew he had

offered the warning for her benefit, but she was enjoying spending this time with him. Yes, she'd just met him, but she rather liked him. Would it be wrong to hope she didn't return back to her time when tomorrow came?

She considered what she would do if she happened to wake up tomorrow and find herself back in the future. While it made the most sense to stay there, especially after knowing Julian was stuck repeating the same day over and over, she didn't think she would do it. She had a nagging suspicion that if she woke up tomorrow in her time, she'd most likely come back here, the consequences be damned.

Chapter Twelve

That afternoon when the rain was at its lightest for the day, Julian summoned the butler to take him and Willow out in the carriage. “Stop before we reach the bridge,” Julian instructed him.

Willow had accepted the cloak he’d given her. It was surprisingly cool inside the mansion. She recalled it feeling a bit chilly in her time when it had rained, so this wasn’t different. For some reason, though, being stuck in a home without the modern convenience of a furnace made it feel colder than it really was. Just knowing she couldn’t adjust a thermostat probably made her more aware of the chill around her.

Now, as she sat in the carriage next to Julian, she was really glad for the cloak. It not only braced her from the cool day, but it had a hood that would protect her face from the drizzle. She had no idea if they had umbrellas in this time. Julian had only put on a hat and a cloak of his own.

“It’s surprisingly chilly for a summer day,” Willow said in an attempt to break the silence.

He opened his eyes and turned his gaze to her, and it suddenly occurred to her just how exhausted he was. She supposed that was to be expected given how long he’d been forced to repeat the same day over and over. She was tempted to put her arm around his or offer some kind of touch in hope it might bring him some comfort, but she refrained from the impulse. She hardly knew him. He would think she was strange if she acted in such a forward manner.

Strange. Or desperate.

“The rain makes things colder,” he replied. “The sun warms things up.”

“You’ve had rain every single day? The weather doesn’t change at all?”

“Everything is the same. I can instruct the servants to do something different, but if I don’t, they do and say the same things they did on the first June 17. Except for remembering every day as it happens, I don’t age.”

She shivered, and it wasn’t from the cold. “I know being stuck is awful regardless of the weather, but it’s a shame June 17, 1817 wasn’t a sunny day.”

“I don’t know. The rain sets the right mood for it. On some days, it’s soothing.”

Maybe it would be. All of this dreariness probably comforted him in some sad way. She looked out the window. The view was so different without the tall shrubs. She could see the hills in the distance. It almost didn’t seem like the same place with this change.

But her gaze went to the moat surrounding the property, and she was assured she really was in the same place.

"I wish I could go to your time," he said. "It'd be nice to break the cycle."

Her gaze went back to him, and once more, she had to resist the urge to touch him. "I hope when you wake up tomorrow it will be June 18. I hope that the magic in the barrier connecting our times will force things to move forward for you again."

"Even if it doesn't, at least I've had this day. It's the best one I've had in two centuries." He grew silent for a moment then softly added, "It's been nice having you here to talk to."

Heat rose up to her cheeks. Before she could enjoy the compliment too much, she reasoned that he would say this to anyone who crossed over into this time. It wasn't necessarily her.

And that was to be expected, wasn't it? She couldn't imagine how hard this had been for him. She was fortunate. All she'd dealt with was being stuck on the property for less than a month.

They grew silent until the carriage came to a stop. He didn't bother waiting for the butler to open the door. He jumped out of the carriage and offered to help her down.

She accepted his hand. "Thank you." Once her feet were on a part of the path that wasn't forming a puddle, she added, "In the future, men don't often help women out of things like carriages."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. How could she best explain this to someone in his time? "Acts of chivalry just aren't done. I'm the first one to say it's good for women to be seen as equal to men, but it is nice when a man does little things like open doors and help a woman down from the carriage."

"I've never considered a lady to be inferior to me," he said in a way that indicated he felt insulted.

"From what I've learned about the 1800s, I don't think women were business owners or political leaders. Were they? Am I wrong?"

"There are a few who run businesses in the middle class, though their husbands are officially the owner. As for leadership, no. That is strictly a gentleman's pursuit. However, I will admit that some ladies consider themselves fortunate when their husbands die, but that's because their husbands didn't really care about them. I can't imagine any gentleman who loves his wife treating her in a way that will make her think of his death as offering her freedom."

She considered his words and could see the validity in them. "You're right. She wouldn't if he loved her. If he loved her, he would treat her well." She glanced at the butler, who was standing not too far from them. "Anyway, I just think it was nice you offered a

chivalrous gesture, that's all. Are you ready to go to the bridge?"

He offered a nod, and they headed for it.

"Did you put the moat in?" she asked.

"No, my grandfather did," he replied. "He seemed to think the property needed to be protected." He chuckled. "Isn't that funny? It's not the property that needs protecting. It's the owners of it who need to be protected from the property."

She frowned. "I wonder if he knew something important about this place. Did he explain what this property needed protection from?"

"I never spoke to him. He was deceased before I was old enough to remember him. My father often said that he wished he had listened to him more. My mother said my grandfather was superstitious. She said he saw shadows where there wasn't anything to worry about. She wasn't talking about actual shadows. These were things to be wary of. Little dangers here and there. Things produced by a wild imagination."

"Maybe his imagination wasn't so wild. Do you have anything that belonged to him in the attic?"

"Yes, there's a trunk with his things in it. Do you think there's something important in it?"

"We won't know unless we look."

"We'll look after dinner," he said. "When we return, we'll both need to change clothes. The rain is light, but we'll still be cold and wet. I'll have one of the maids assist you with your hair and dress."

Before she could ask him why he made such a strange offer since she assumed even people in this time dressed themselves, they reached the bridge. Deciding the bridge was more important, she joined him as he walked onto the stone surface.

He stopped halfway on the bridge and touched the air. She saw the waves of pink and purple radiate from his hand and travel in both directions down the moat.

He gasped and stepped back. "Those colors have never happened before," he told her. "Did you see them?"

"Pink and purple ripples?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I saw them," she said. "They go all the way down the moat."

"Do they?" He took a step forward and touched the barrier again. The same colors sent ripples down the entire length of the moat. He touched it several more times, and the ripples went at a faster pace. "Why didn't I see them before?"

That was a good question. She was sure it was significant that he hadn't noticed those colors until now. Like the pieces of parchment, he hadn't noticed the pink glow before, either. These things couldn't be a coincidence. Was there something about her arrival that changed

things in this time?

"What did you see before?" she asked.

"Nothing. It was just like the air around us." His gaze went to the butler who was standing by the carriage, looking bored but willing to patiently wait for them. "Do you see any colors?" he called out to the butler as he touched the barrier again.

The butler's eyebrows furrowed. "Colors, my lord?"

"When I put my hand up here, do you see anything?" Julian touched the spot again.

The butler shook his head. "I'm sorry, my lord, but I don't see any unusual colors."

Julian looked at her. "Only you and I see them."

"I saw them every time I tried to cross the bridge in my time," she told him. "I saw them when I crossed over into this time through that mirror, too." She put her hand up and pushed it forward. Resistance pushed back at her, and the pink and purple ripples went down the length of the moat. She tried another part of the barrier, and the same thing happened. "It looks like I'm stuck here with you."

"What happens if we put our hands on this invisible wall at the same time?"

Intrigued, she put her hand back up to the barrier and waited for him to do the same. She blinked in surprise when she saw that instead of pink and purple, she saw red and gold ripples. But even though that was different, neither one could get through the barrier.

"This is getting weirder and weirder all the time," she whispered.

"Weirder?" he asked.

"Strange. Odd. Unreal." She dropped her hand and a blast of cool air coursed through her. She shivered and pulled the cloak more tightly around her body.

"I felt it, too," he said. "It was like a sudden burst of air without the wind."

"I think it's magic," she replied. "Something, or someone, doesn't want us to leave, and it probably wants us in the same time. That's why I could only step through the mirror, and it's why the mirror exploded."

"We can't be sure that you're trapped here. You might wake up tomorrow and be back in your time."

"I guess. I mean, anything's possible." She wouldn't have believed all of this was possible before, but so much had changed since she stepped on this property. Who knew inheriting a property could lead to such craziness?

"Have you tried swimming across the moat?" he asked.

"No. The thought didn't occur to me."

"I've tried it, and it does no good. The moat has the same barrier in

it. I tried swimming through different sections of it. The thing is deep. If you were to take a horse across it, it would drown. This bridge is the only safe passage in or out of here." After a moment, he added, "I don't think there's anything else to do, at least not right now. Are you ready to return to the manor?"

"Yes." As he pointed out, there was nothing else to do, and she wasn't going to try to swim across the moat. For one, she doubted she'd make it past the barrier. And two, she bet that water was cold.

"Once we get inside, I'll summon a maid to help you."

"About that," she said as they headed for the carriage. "Why do you think I need a maid? I dress and comb my hair in my own time."

"In this time, a maid helps the mistress of the estate do those things. Plus, she sees to bringing up the bath or any other thing the mistress needs. I know we're not married, but you did inherit this estate. It's only right that you're given the treatment due to your status. It is unfortunate there are no living males. I hate knowing my title eventually becomes extinct."

"I have no idea how these things with titles work. The only thing I know about England is that there are kings and queens and princes and princesses."

"Yes, we have them in this time, too. We also have dukes, marquees, earls, viscounts, barons, baronets, and knights."

"I remember a singer being knighted by the queen, but that was only because it was mentioned in a paper in America. I didn't read the article. I only read the headline."

"A singer was knighted?"

"It sounded like it was important from the picture on the paper. A bunch of attention was paid to it."

"I can't imagine a singer being knighted unless he performed some great feat in battle. Was this singer in a war?"

She laughed. "No. He was just a popular singer who sold a lot of albums." By the expression on his face, she could tell he didn't understand why that was important. "It doesn't matter. It's not like it changes anything about our situation."

Though they walked along the drier patches of the road, mud found its way to the soles of her shoes. Now she could appreciate the invention of pavement.

They reached the carriage, and the butler opened the door for them. Since Julian had helped her down, she wondered if she was supposed to wait for him to help her back into the carriage, and sure enough, he held his hand out to assist her, which was good since the mud made her shoes slippery.

She sat on the seat and spread out the gown and cloak so that she was comfortable. This was a lot different from wearing pants. She had

to figure out a way to sit down and be comfortable with a gown tucked around her legs. It was a shame everyone in this time would freak out if she went back to wearing her t-shirt and jeans.

Julian settled beside her, and the butler shut the door.

"Do the servants usually go around opening and shutting doors?" she asked.

He seemed amused by the question. "They don't follow me around all day to open and shut doors, but when going in or out of the manor or carriage, they do. If someone can't afford a servant to do the task for them, then they have to open and shut their own doors all the time."

"God forbid anyone should be stuck with such a cruel fate," she joked.

He chuckled. "I admit that I'm spoiled that way. Wealth has its advantages."

"That's true in any time period."

She returned his smile then directed her attention to the small window as the carriage moved forward.

Chapter Thirteen

Julian took more time getting dressed for dinner that day than he usually did. In fact, most days, he didn't bother changing into his evening outfit because there was no point in it. But he had a reason to do it today. For the first time in over two centuries, he had a guest. And not just any guest. This was someone who understood what he was going through. Though their situations weren't exactly the same, they were similar enough where he didn't feel so alone in the world.

As his valet adjusted the cravat around his neck, he was struck with the hope that when he woke up the next morning, Willow would still be here. Whether he repeated the day or not didn't even matter. He just didn't want to be alone anymore.

It was a terrible thing to even be tempted to hope she'd have to stay here with him. What kind of person would wish this fate on someone else?

He closed his eyes. The long and painful years were more pronounced today than they'd been at any other time in his life.

He tried to remember the last time he'd had a happy day. He supposed that would have been the day Francis came to his townhouse in London to tell him about his betrothal.

Sometimes that all seemed like it had happened to someone else. He was so far removed from all he'd known and loved. Had it been sunny the day Francis told him about the engagement? He couldn't even remember if it'd been sunny on the day he left London.

The valet finished with his cravat and asked, "Is there anything else you need, my lord?"

Julian opened his eyes and shook his head. "No, that is all."

He waited for the valet to leave before he checked his reflection in the mirror. It'd been a long time since he cared about the way he looked. He told himself that having a guest for the first time in a very long time was reason enough to look his best, but another part of him, one he'd rather not acknowledge, argued there was another reason altogether.

He started to leave his bedchamber but glanced at the door connecting his room with the one Willow was in. No. He couldn't go in through that way. She might still be getting ready for dinner. And besides, such intimacy was only between a husband and wife.

He continued on his way out of the room then went to the door of her bedchamber and knocked on it.

A moment later, a maid answered the door.

He was tempted to peer around the maid to see how close Willow was to being done but decided against it when he considered she

might not be appropriately attired yet. “Would you tell Miss Knudson that I’ll be in the drawing room?”

The maid said she would, so he turned down the hall. He glanced at the wall where the barrier between his world and Willow’s had been. The strange object had not returned to the space it’d been for all of these years. Would he wake up tomorrow and find it had been returned? It had returned every time he’d managed to destroy it in the past. But this was different. It had destroyed itself.

Exactly how did magic work?

Taking an uncertain breath, he continued down the hall and went to the drawing room. He had no idea how things would go from here. He supposed all he could do was get the most enjoyment from this day possible.

He took the candelabra from the top of the fireplace and set it on the desk. He would light the candles when they were ready to go back to the attic to check his grandfather’s trunk. Or trunks. He couldn’t remember how much any of his ancestors had left behind.

The rain was coming heavier now. He glanced at the window and saw it pelting against the glass. He wouldn’t mind seeing the sun again. It’d been so long since he’d felt its warmth on his face. The closest thing he had to compare it to was the feel of the flame of a candle near his skin. He could close his eyes and pretend to be outside. He hadn’t done that in a very long time.

There were many things he hadn’t done in a very long time. There were many things he hadn’t *felt* in a very long time, the most significant one being hope. He’d forgotten how nice hope was. It might be the best emotion a person could experience. What good was any other emotion without hope?

The butler came into the room with a tray of tea and crumpets, but he stumbled forward and dropped them. “Oh, I-I’m terribly sorry,” the butler said as he started to retrieve the items from the floor.

In all that happened, Julian had forgotten the butler always did that. He should have asked one of the maids to bring in something.

“It’s all right,” Julian said as he hurried to pull the cord to summon the maid.

“I’m not usually so clumsy.” The butler finished putting the empty teapot, cups, and soiled crumpets on the tray. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s the day,” Julian replied. “Nothing can be blamed for it.” And who knew if the butler would remember this tomorrow?

The maid came into the room, and Julian asked her to clean the remaining mess while the butler headed out of the room.

The maid left to get her cleaning supplies, leaving Julian alone once more. But this time, he had something to look forward to.

Willow would join him for dinner this evening.

He went to the doorway just as she was heading toward him. Instinctively, he smiled at the sight of her. It might have been a long time since he'd seen the ladies in London, but he couldn't remember any of them looking as lovely as she did.

She wore a red gown with a gold ribbon tied just under her breasts. The bottom of the gown was edged in lace with a gold trim. Her slippers were a nice golden color. He didn't recall ever seeing his mother in the gown, but he recalled pulling it from the trunk. His mother had had a lot of gowns. Some were still in the trunk. If Willow were to end up staying here, he would have to get the rest of them out for her.

His gaze went to her dark hair. The maid had fashioned it into an attractive style. She had pulled most of Willow's hair up with hairpins but had allowed some of the curls to frame her pretty face. Then his gaze went to the rest of Willow's body, and he felt warmth creep up his face. He forced his attention to go back to her face.

Willow reached him. "I've never worn anything this fancy before. I feel odd. Do I look okay?"

"You look perfect," he replied. He didn't know what she could have done to look any better.

"It must be the clothes and hairstyle. I'm not used to it. I feel like I'm dressing up for a Halloween costume party or something."

"Halloween costume party?"

"It's a thing where people dress up as someone else and dance and have a good time. Do you ever dress up in clothes you don't ordinarily wear?"

"I've been to masquerade balls where we hide most of our faces with a mask."

"That's kind of what a costume party is." She glanced down the hall. "Are we supposed to go directly to the dining room?"

"We'll wait for the butler to tell us dinner is ready. We can wait in here." He waved to the settee. "Take care not to step in that." He pointed to the spot where the butler had dropped the tray. "The maid will be in to clean it."

He waited until she was sitting before he settled beside her.

She pointed to his portrait that was on the wall. "That survived the centuries. Just the other day, I was sitting in here and looking at that."

"My father insisted I get my portrait done when I was twenty. A lot of gentlemen do it."

"Did you want to get it done?"

"I didn't mind it, but it wasn't easy to stand still for all those hours. It ended up taking almost a week in total to do."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "That long?"

"The artist wanted to get all of the details in."

"You only recently came here from London, didn't you?"

"If you forget the two centuries that have passed, I did," he said. "I grew up here and then went to London. Before the night I got the missive, I didn't have any trouble leaving this property."

"It's magic. It has to be magic. There's no other way to explain it. Before all of this, I would have looked for a scientific reason to explain all this, but some things can't be explained by science."

"It's hard to believe in something as ridiculous as magic."

"I know, but how else can you explain it?"

He shrugged. "Unfortunately, I can't."

"Since there is no logical reason for all of this, then all we can do is accept the possibility that something beyond science is at work."

"Something like magic."

Willow nodded.

The maid came into the room to clean the rug just as the butler told them dinner was ready.

The conversation at an end for the moment, Julian rose from the settee and escorted Willow to the dining room.

After dinner, Julian set the candelabra on the ledge of the windowsill in the attic. Ignoring the rain as it beat against the windowpane, he started lifting the sheets from the trunks.

"I don't remember where my grandfather's things were packed," he told Willow.

She glanced around the attic and shivered. "It's spooky at night up here."

"That's the nature of attics. They're not places one wants to visit past sunset. If I knew I was going to wake up tomorrow morning with you here on June 18, I'd wait for tomorrow to do this."

"I understand. We have to make the most of the time we have. I don't know what to expect, either."

He found an older trunk under one of the sheets and unlatched it so he could look at the contents in it. "This is it. This is my grandfather's trunk." He removed the sheet completely from it then went to grab the candelabra. He set it on a nearby covered trunk.

Willow walked up to him and examined the contents. "There are no clothes in here. It's just a bunch of old books and journals."

He lifted a couple of books out and read the titles. *Irish Folklore. Maps of Ireland. Myths and Legends from the Irish.*

Willow pulled out one of the hardbound books. "*Leprechauns and Gold*," she read.

“I wager those have something to do with Ireland. All of these books seem to have something to do with that country,” he replied as he sorted through the rest of the books.

“Growing up, there was this cereal I ate that involved a leprechaun.” When he glanced at her in surprise, she laughed. “I don’t mean I ate a leprechaun. The cereal was made up of whole grain oats and marshmallows. The leprechaun was a cartoon. It was a made-up character that was the symbol for the cereal. There were commercials of kids always trying to get the cereal from him.”

He didn’t have the slightest idea what she was talking about, but he figured that was to be expected since this was something that occurred in the future.

She cleared her throat. “Anyway, because of the cereal, I know leprechauns come from Irish folklore. So it fits with the rest of the books your grandfather had.”

“What about fairies?” He retrieved another book and showed her the title that read, *Fairies: Family Divisions & Levels of Magic.*

“All I know about fairies is what I’ve seen in movies, and I saw those when I was a child. Movies are a big thing in the future. But I don’t know if fairies are a thing in Irish folklore or not. I assume they are if they’re lumped in with the rest of these books.”

“I’ve never been to Ireland. I don’t know anything about it except that it’s really green over there because of the rain.”

“It is. I’ve seen movies that were filmed there.”

He wondered what movies were. It seemed like they must be important since she had mentioned them a couple of times. Perhaps it was how they received education. Maybe they didn’t use books in the future.

She took the book from him. “It mentions magic in the title. We’re bound here by something I can only describe as magic. Is it possible that fairies have something to do with this?”

He shrugged. “I don’t believe in fairies.”

“I didn’t, either, until seeing this. One thing I am certain of is that magic is behind everything. Your grandfather knew something. It has something to do with Ireland, leprechauns, and fairies. Why else would he have these books here?”

That was a good question. His grandfather had owned these books, and yet, they hadn’t been put in the library. They were tucked away in a trunk in this attic. Was there a reason for that?

His gaze went to the worn journal at the top of the pile. He picked it up and opened it. Most of it seemed to be drawings his grandfather had made of maps. The maps weren’t exactly the same, but they were similar. He picked up another journal. This one also contained maps, but these had been marked with detailed illustrations of natural

features like rivers, hills, and caves.

Willow picked up another journal and searched through it as Julian tried to make sense of the paths that seemed to have no rhyme or reason to them.

"He actually wrote in this one," Willow said as she showed him the journal she was holding.

He looked at it and saw that it seemed to be a diary, for there were dated entries.

"This is hard to read," she said as she squinted at it. "It's too bad this wasn't typed out."

He read a couple of lines in the journal. He had to agree that his grandfather's handwriting wasn't the easiest to decipher.

She yawned, and he realized how late the hour was. Unfortunately, they weren't going to get any answers tonight. They were only beginning to discover what might be useful information.

Who knew if she'd even be here tomorrow or even if tomorrow would be a new day? One thing he did know was that nothing ever disappeared. Since all of these books and journals were here on the evening of June 16, they would stay here. That meant he could keep searching for answers.

He glanced at her as she closed the journal and set it on the other journals. Regardless of whether she was going to be with him tomorrow, he owed it to both of them to follow the clues in these books and journals to the end. Maybe if he could free himself from this curse, he could free her, too.

She collected some books, and he hurried to gather the rest of them and the journals. He rose to his feet, and since he had a lot more to carry than she did, he asked, "Would you carry the candelabra downstairs?"

She nodded and went to retrieve it.

He escorted her down to the floor where the bedchambers were. He knew it would be appropriate for her to retire to the bedchamber he had given her to use, but he hated the idea of being alone for the rest of the night. Until midnight, at least, he most wanted to have her with him.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to stay with me in the library for the night?" he asked. "There's a comfortable settee in there you can rest on. I want to continue looking through these books and journals."

"I understand," she replied. "If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't want to be alone, either. I'll go to the library with you."

He wasn't sure what the thing about shoes was about, but he was too relieved to care. It was already 10:15. That only left him with an hour and forty-five minutes.

"You should bring a blanket," he said. "It'll be a bit chilly down

there. I can get it for you."

"A blanket is a good idea."

He breathed a sigh of relief and went to get a blanket for her. It was wrong of him to hope she would still be here when the clock struck midnight. He should wish for her to be able to go back. Though, if she was also stuck on the property, what difference would it make? At least if she was here, he could make sure she was all right.

He returned to the hallway with a thick blanket and led her down to the library.

"This place is downright spooky when it's night," she said.

He felt a smile tug at his lips. "It's not for the weak of heart. But you have nothing to worry about. It's safe."

The butler came into the room as Julian and Willow set the books and journals on the desk. "Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"I wouldn't mind some tea," Julian said with a glance at Willow.

"I don't need anything," she replied. "I'm not thirsty or hungry."

"Just one cup with the tea," Julian told him. "And have the maid bring it." He wasn't sure if the butler would drop something a second time in the day, but why take the chance?

As the butler left, Julian wrapped the blanket around Willow's shoulders. "I hope that warms you up."

"It does. Thanks." She pulled it closer around herself. "You're right about it being chilly."

"It's because of the rain. The rain always makes things colder in the summer." What he wouldn't give for a nice and warm sunny day. When she yawned, he said, "Why don't you get comfortable on the settee? I'll start sorting through these and see if I can make any sense from them."

She nodded and settled into the settee that wasn't too far from the desk.

Good. He'd have no trouble seeing her while he sat at the desk. He took out his pocket watch and placed it on the desk. When it turned midnight, she might disappear. If she did, it would be an indication that time was not going to move forward for him. It was also going to mean he'd be trapped in this lonely existence for so long he might as well stop counting the years.

"In case you wake up tomorrow in your own time, thank you for coming over here today," he told her.

She gave him a smile that made him feel more connected with the world than he'd had in a very long time. "I don't know what to expect when I wake up, but it was nice to get to meet the person whose portrait I've been staring at in the drawing room. It's also good to know this place isn't haunted. I don't believe in ghosts, but when I saw you in that mirror, it did make me question my sanity. Though, I

suppose magic isn't exactly something that's normal, either. To be honest, nothing would surprise me at this point."

She chuckled, and he smiled.

If he woke up tomorrow and found her gone, he was going to miss her. He just might miss her more than he'd missed anything in his entire life. "If you do wake up in the future and remember this day, don't come back. It's no way for anyone to live."

He caught the sympathy in her expression as the maid came into the room. Forcing aside the conflicting emotions welling up within him, he sat behind the desk and began studying the journals and books in earnest.

Chapter Fourteen

Julian woke from sleep to something bright hitting his eyes. He wasn't aware of it right away. Sleep was slow in parting from him. He became aware that he was dreaming, and in the dream, he was at a ball talking to Francis. Perhaps it was a memory mixed within a dream.

"Is there any advice you have for me?" Francis asked him in the dream.

"Stay alive," Julian replied.

Francis laughed. "What's gotten into you, cousin? Don't you know I fully intend to do that? I'm going to marry the most wonderful lady in the world. Why would I not live to see that?"

Julian let out a sigh as he woke up. At first, he thought it was still night and the candlelight was hitting his eyes. But he opened his eyes and realized it wasn't candlelight. It was sunlight.

Sunlight?

Every day for the past two centuries, it'd always been raining when he woke up.

He bolted up in the chair and knocked over one of the journals he'd been reading late into the night. Ignoring the journal, he looked at the settee and saw that Willow was still here.

He picked up his watch and saw that it was a little after eight. He went to the window and peered outside.

Not a cloud was in sight.

The sky was the most beautiful shade of blue he'd ever seen in his life. His gaze went to the grass and the trees that were still damp from the rain. He took a moment to compose himself so he could be sure he wasn't dreaming.

Once he was assured that this was real, he hurried out of the room and headed for the kitchen. Before he got there, he almost bumped into one of the maids.

"What day is it?" he asked her.

She blinked at him in surprise. "My lord?"

"The day? Is it June 17?"

"No, my lord. It's June 18."

"And yesterday. There was a lady who came here. Do you remember her?"

A blush crept up her cheeks. "Yes. Miss Knudson. Shall I summon the maid assigned to her to get her ready for the morning?"

Ignoring the question, he asked, "You cleaned up something upstairs in the hallway. Do you remember what it was?"

"Um, well, I think it was pieces of glass."

“Is something wrong, my lord?” the butler asked as he left the kitchen.

“Yesterday, I had you take me out in the carriage,” he told the butler. “Where did you take me?”

The butler’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “The bridge, my lord. I took you and your guest in the carriage.”

He let out a cheer and hugged the startled butler and maid. They remembered! They actually remembered the events from the day before. And it was sunny out today, and Willow was still here.

“It’s June 18!” Julian exclaimed, knowing that even as he said the words, he was only confusing them all the more. “Miss Knudson and I will go to our bedchambers,” he finally said since there was no way he could explain that they’d all been trapped in time for two centuries. “Send Miss Knudson’s lady’s maid and my valet up.”

Now that Willow was going to be stuck in this time with him, he had to make sure she had all of the things she needed. He’d also have to look into getting her a larger wardrobe and making sure the gowns were altered to fit her.

He went back to the library and blew out the candles. Then he gently shook Willow’s shoulder.

“It’s morning,” he told her. “Willow?”

She stirred from her sleep and opened her eyes.

“It’s June 18,” he said, unable to hide his excitement. “It’s no longer June 17! I think you coming into this time changed everything. Time finally started moving forward again.”

He would have told her he was sorry she was stuck in the past since he was sure she didn’t want to be here, but he was too happy about the change in events that he couldn’t say he was sorry. The truth was, he was relieved and happy. And, if he was even more honest with himself, he was glad she was here with him. So what good would it be to lie?

She sat up, and a couple of hairpins fell to the floor. He hurried to pick them up.

“You mean, you’re not repeating the same day again?” she asked as she struggled to wake up.

“That’s right. I’m not.”

He probably should have let her sleep longer. Yesterday had been a long and busy one, but even as he criticized himself for waking her up, he was still too excited to suggest she go back to sleep.

This was the best thing that ever happened to him. Whatever magic had kept him trapped to a single day had finally been lifted, and he wanted to celebrate his good fortune with the only person who was aware of what he’d been going through. While he could tell the servants, he doubted they’d believe him. They hadn’t noticed the

passage of time. They couldn't appreciate how important this change in events was.

She blinked a few more times and then rose to her feet. She looked at the window. "It's sunny."

"It hasn't been sunny for two centuries. It's the most beautiful sight I've seen in such a long time."

She smiled in a way that told him she was glad for him. "We should go out so you can feel the sunlight on your face."

That was an excellent idea. And… "Maybe we can get off the property today. Maybe whatever bound us here is gone."

"It's worth a try. When do you want to go out and check the barrier?"

"After we eat." He glanced at her evening gown. She couldn't go out in that. "You need to put on a morning gown for the meal. Then I'll need to see if my mother had a riding outfit. I'm sure she did. She used to go out riding when the weather was nice."

"Riding? You don't want to go in the carriage?"

"Not on a day like this. I don't want to waste my time in a carriage. Is that all right?"

"I've never ridden a horse before."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Do you just take a carriage or walk wherever you need to go?"

"Actually, I go in a car, but there are none in this time."

"A car? Is this like an elevator or moving stairs?"

"Kind of. Imagine if a carriage could move without horses. It's like that."

Though he tried to come up with an image of how that might be, his mind drew a blank. "Was magic responsible for cars?"

She laughed. "No. They ran on an engine."

"A steam engine?"

"No. This is a different kind of engine, but I guess a steam engine is a good enough comparison. It's going to be a long time before a car comes along. I don't even know when the first one was invented. I know! I'll draw a picture of one for you. I'll even draw a picture of an airplane."

"An airplane?"

"It's how people fly."

"Fly? Like a bird?"

"Yes, but we don't have to flap our arms."

"Does this airplane require the aid of magic?" he asked.

"No. Again, it involves an engine, but not a steam one."

She probably picked up on how overwhelming this was since she offered him a shrug. "There's so much about the future that would surprise you, but I don't even know if I could explain it all. I suppose

it doesn't matter. The important thing is that it's June 18." She took an uncertain breath. "Is it hard to ride a horse?"

Feeling much more at ease with discussing things he was familiar with, he took her by the elbow and escorted her out of the room. "It's not hard. It's just a matter of maintaining your balance. There will be a saddle and reins to help you, and of course, I will be close by. I think you'll enjoy it."

He, for one, was going to enjoy it. The best part was that he wasn't going to have to do it alone. With her here, the future just might be one he could look forward to again.

As Julian had thought, his mother had left behind a riding outfit. The maid Julian had assigned as Willow's "lady's maid" had to make some minor modifications to the outfit so that it would fit properly. The lady's maid also pinned her hair up into a style that Willow thought was much too fancy for a ride on a horse, but she reasoned this was how the ladies in this time did their hair. She couldn't recall a single old-fashioned photograph or portrait where a woman had a ponytail.

What Willow found amusing was that after all the work the lady's maid put into fixing her hair, she proceeded to put a hat on her head. Then she pinned the hat in place so it wouldn't, as she explained it, blow off her head in case it was windy or the horse galloped too fast. What was the point in doing all of that work to her hair just to cover it up? The woman could have just put her hair in a simple bun and accomplished the same thing.

Willow surmised that this was how people were back in the early 1800s, at least in England. They liked to dress up for everything. So far, since she'd been here, it'd been like playing dress up for one thing after another. It was no wonder people didn't get bored without TV or the internet. They were too busy changing clothes and fixing their hair multiple times a day.

She couldn't help but feel sorry for the lady's maid, but then she reasoned that the lady's maid would probably get bored if she didn't do this with her time.

When the lady's maid was done, Willow headed for the drawing room since Julian said he'd meet her there. The boots were a little big, so the lady's maid had cushioned them with some fabric to make them easier to walk in. Even so, the lady's maid had said she would speak with Julian about arranging for her to get boots and slippers that fit better.

Willow took that to mean she was expected to stay here. She wondered if it was wrong for her to be secretly happy about it. It

wasn't every day a woman came across someone like Julian. She almost felt like a fairytale princess who'd finally met her prince charming.

The only thing that put a slight damper on her enthusiasm was the way the servants kept looking at her. Though no one had said anything about her being here, she noted the curiosity in their gazes. There was no doubt they assumed she was sleeping with Julian. What was worse was wondering if they picked up on the fact that she was attracted to him. She ended up avoiding eye contact with them, just in case they could read her mind.

When she reached the drawing room, she saw that Julian had opened the windows. It was still morning, and given how it had rained all day yesterday and through some of the night, there was still a chill from the outside air. He was standing in front of the window with the most sunlight filtering into the room. She paused and watched him. He was staring outside as if he'd forgotten what the sun looked like.

And for all she knew, maybe he had. A long time ago, she'd read a story about a little girl on a world where no one could go outside for years at a time. Then, there was a small window of time when they could, and this girl eagerly waited for it, only to be locked into a room by others in her class. The poor girl was robbed of the opportunity to go outside and was left waiting for the next round of years to pass before she had the chance to go out again. It had depressed Willow to read that short story while in middle school. It was good Julian finally benefited from this moment. Unlike that girl, he was going to be able to go out and enjoy the day.

Willow stepped farther into the room and asked, "Are you ready to go out?"

Julian turned from the window and smiled at her in a way that made her heartbeat pick up. "I am. I can't wait to be outside."

"If you're so eager, why didn't you go out while I was getting ready? I wouldn't have minded."

"I preferred to wait for you."

He did? Now it wasn't just her heartbeat that had picked up; she had to contend with butterflies in her stomach as well.

He went over to her. "I see the lady's maid was able to make the necessary adjustments to my mother's old riding outfit so that it fits you properly."

"Yes, it didn't take her long, but I notice I don't have pants on like you do. How am I supposed to ride a horse in a dress?"

"If you were to wear an outfit like mine, the servants would probably threaten to quit."

"But they won't threaten to quit because they think I snuck in here in the middle of the night to be with you even though we're not

married?"

"While that is scandalous, it's better than you wearing a gentleman's riding outfit. Undoubtedly, they're whispering about our being together like this in disapproval, but we're not in London, so nothing terrible will come of it."

"But something terrible would happen if I wore my jeans to ride a horse?"

"It's not just the clothes. It's the manner you'd be sitting on the horse. It'd be highly inappropriate. At least the things the servants think we're doing in private isn't out in the open for all to see."

She couldn't understand why wearing pants and riding her horse like women in her time did was a bigger deal than the servants thinking she was having some tawdry love affair with Julian, but she could tell by the expression on his face that it was.

Since there was nothing she could do to change the way people thought in this time period, she decided to let the matter go. She decided to simply accept his arm and let him take her to the stables.

She recalled seeing the large structure on her walk when she first arrived at this place, but it had been empty back then. Today, she saw a dog running around a man Julian referred to as the stablemaster. A few horses were eating grass in the fenced area near the stables. The dog caught sight of a black cat running by and left the man to pursue it inside the stables.

"Was the stablemaster and these animals here yesterday?" she asked.

"Of course," Julian replied. "Did you think the carriage and horses appeared out of nowhere when the butler brought them to the front of the manor?"

Catching the teasing tone in his voice, she grinned. "Okay. I stand corrected. I just didn't expect all of this activity. In the future, the stables are empty. It's all quiet. The only living thing here was me. And a couple of mice." She couldn't forget the fact that one of Violet's crewmen had found two of them in the traps he'd set. Even now, it made her shiver.

"I can't imagine this place without any of the animals or servants here. It wouldn't be the same."

Maybe the fact that he hadn't been all alone had been what had kept him sane. Being alone for a few days had spooked her. Had she realized how serious the situation was, she wouldn't have read a thriller. All it had done was creep her out even more.

They reached the stables, and the stablemaster came over to them.

"Get two horses ready for us," Julian told him.

"Do you want to take Golden Ember?" the stablemaster asked him.

Julian nodded. "Miss Knudson will take Scarlet Glow." As the

stablemaster went to get the horses ready, Julian turned to her. "Scarlet is a gentle mare. She's ideal for the first-time rider."

That was good because she could use a horse that wasn't going to toss her around. Based on the bumpy carriage ride, she suspected the horse wasn't going to be nearly as comfortable as being in a car.

"Did you see the inside of the stables when you were in your time?" Julian asked.

"No, I didn't think to look in there."

"Would you like to see it?"

"Sure." It wasn't like she had anything else to do at the moment.

She followed him into the stables and was surprised to see so many horses. "What do you need with," she quickly counted the horses that were in their stalls, "eight horses?"

"Twelve in all. There are three in the pasture and the coachman took one to London yesterday to deliver the missive to my cousin." He paused then smiled. "It's nice to finally say the word 'yesterday' and know it means exactly what it's supposed to."

"I bet it does."

Something leapt down from one of the beams in the rafters and settled on one of the benches. She jerked but quickly calmed when she realized it was just a cat.

Julian chuckled. "I should have warned you. Horses aren't the only animals in here."

She relaxed and laughed. "I knew cats were nimble, but this one seemed to come out of nowhere." She glanced up from the spot where it had been and saw an owl hiding in the corner.

"That's a barn owl," Julian told her. "That, and the cat, are good at getting rid of rodents."

She frowned as she became aware that a memory lingered just on the edge of her mind. It was silly. She hadn't seen the barn owl before, and there had been no cat when she came to this property in the future. But still, there was something familiar about the two animals. If she was right, they picked up on the memory, too, since both seemed to be staring at her.

A horse from a nearby stall neighed, and she turned her attention to it. It was a dark-brown steed. Like the owl and cat, it seemed to be focused in on her. She glanced at the owl, but it was hard to see much of it in the shadows. The cat, however, was out in the open, and she had a perfect view of it. It had deep rich black fur and bright green eyes. She'd seen eyes like that before. She was sure of it. But where? And when?

The horse neighed again, and Julian went over to stroke its mane. "This was my father's horse. I thought it had gone missing. I don't recall seeing it for the longest time. Though, to be honest, I didn't

make it a habit of keeping track of the animals."

The horse turned its attention to Julian, and that's when she noticed the white streak in its black mane.

Willow gasped. It couldn't be! It wasn't possible.

But how was coming back into this time possible? How was it possible that she hadn't been able to physically leave this property? How was it possible Julian had been stuck inside the same day for two centuries?

Was it possible she wasn't the only thing that came into the past when she stepped through the portal?

She glanced around the barn. Was there another animal that would remind her of the people she had seen on this property in the future? The lawyer? Violet? Surely, if Violet's crewmen were here, then Violet should be here, too.

"What's wrong?" Julian asked as he went back to her.

She gave a careful inspection of the stables but didn't see any other animal that reminded her of anyone she'd recently met. Even the dog seemed like an ordinary mutt.

Her gaze went back to the horse and cat who were still watching her. The owl hooted, and this time she saw that, while it was still in the rafters, it had come closer. Its face was smushed in, and it had light-brown feathers and a white body.

They were the three men who worked for Violet. Except, they were in animal form in this time.

"You said this was your father's horse?" she asked as she took a cautious step toward it.

The horse didn't give her any indication that it was dangerous. Come to think of it, neither did the cat or owl. They were all just staring at her out of curiosity.

"Yes. He was sired by that horse down there." Julian gestured to another horse further down the stalls. His eyebrows furrowed. "I don't understand. What's so important about this horse?"

Ignoring him, she asked the horse, "Do you remember me?"

The horse neighed. The cat leapt in front of her feet and let out a pleasant meow, and from above, the owl hooted.

"You all remember me," she said. "Does that mean you remember the passage of time, too?"

The horse nodded and neighed again.

"Obviously, there is something important about this that I'm not privy to," Julian spoke up.

She turned to him. "This horse, that cat, and that owl were in the future with me, except they weren't animals; they were people. They were men. They were in charge of taking care of the property. And," she added as something else occurred to her, "they could leave and

come back. The magic didn't confine them here." She glanced at the horse. "Did you age at all?"

The horse shook its head.

"I don't know what to make of this," she told Julian. "For some reason, they were turned into men and were given the task of maintaining this property. There was a woman who was in charge of them. Violet something. I don't remember her last name." She turned back to the horse. "Is Violet here?"

The horse shook its head.

There went the theory that Violet was an animal somewhere on this property.

The cat let out a meow, and she looked at it. The cat swiped its paw in the air and then hissed.

Unfortunately, Willow had no idea what to make of that, except that the cat didn't seem to like Violet.

She sighed. "I wish animals could talk. They know something we don't, and whatever they know, it might be able to help us."

"Lord Blackwell," the stablemaster called out. "The horses are ready."

Willow's attention went back to the horse and cat. "I don't know what any of this means. All I know is that magic is behind it. And somehow Violet is involved. But I assure you that Julian and I are determined to find an answer to all of this."

"Are you certain they understand you?" Julian asked her.

"Yes. They might be animals, but they have a consciousness regular animals don't. They remember the passage of time, and they remember being human. For some reason, they became human to go into the future with Violet, but now they're back in this time as animals. I'm sure there's a connection somehow. It's just a matter of figuring it out."

And, unfortunately, she wasn't going to figure it out right now.

The horse let out a neigh, and the cat returned to the rafters where the owl sat. She supposed that settled things for the moment. She knew the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, but it was too soon to see the whole picture. She was just going to have to hope that things would continue to unfold so this mystery could be solved in time.

She didn't want to alarm Julian, but she had a sinking sensation that whatever was behind this magic had evil intentions. The cat had hissed for a reason. Violet, it seemed, had not been the kind woman she had pretended to be when Willow met her.

"Come," Julian told her. "I want to see if we can cross the bridge."

Giving one last look at the horse, cat, and owl, she joined him.

Chapter Fifteen

Julian and Willow left the stables on their horses. Unlike his father's horse, neither Golden Ember nor Scarlet Glow seemed to have the intellectual capacity to understand what he or Willow were saying. They seemed like any other animal he'd ever come across.

He tried to remember if he had seen his father's horse, the black cat, or the barn owl over the past two centuries, but the days had blurred together. After a while, he'd stopped picking up on anything unless it was different.

"You were born in the future, weren't you?" Julian asked Willow.

"Yes, I was born in the future. I'm only twenty-five. I'm not like Violet or the animals she changed into humans." She didn't bother glancing his way as she spoke. Her gaze was fixed on the reins in her hands, as if she was afraid if she let her gaze off of them, they would disappear and she'd fall off the mare.

"Scarlet Glow is a gentle horse," he assured her. "She prefers to go at a leisurely pace. She provides a smoother ride than most. I've taken her out a couple of times. You can trust her."

"I'm trying, but it's a lot different to ride a horse than it is to be in a car, or even in a carriage," she replied. "This thing has a mind of its own. If it wants to suddenly take off running, there's nothing I can do to stop it."

He tried to hide his amusement, but the grin found its way on his face anyway. "She won't take off running. She hates to run. The worst you have to worry about is her coming to a stop and refusing to go."

"If she does that, I can walk."

"So there's nothing to worry about. Try to relax and enjoy the ride to the bridge. The sun is out. You can see everything better today than you could yesterday when it was raining."

"I'm as relaxed as I can get."

She was? He had hoped his words had eased her nervousness, but apparently, they hadn't. She was still clutching the reins as if her very life depended on it.

He urged his horse to close the distance between them and reached out to pull on her horse's reins so it stopped. Willow let out a gasp and shot him a startled look.

"I apologize for scaring you," he said. "I only wanted you to be able to take a moment to see the view." He released the mare's reins and gestured to the landscape around them. "It looks much better in the sunlight."

Her grip on the reins didn't relent, but she did finally take in the green grass and colorful flowers around them. The water from the

moat was a nice sparkling blue color. With the clouds and rain, it had looked gray. Today, without a single cloud in sight, it seemed to reflect the blueness in the sky. It'd been a long time since he'd had his last sunny day, but he did recall thinking the colors outside were more prominent after the rain had passed.

"It is nice," she said.

"Nice? That's all you're going to say about it?"

"Nice is a compliment."

"It's a meager compliment. Nice is something you say when something is just a little more than bland."

She gave him a sympathetic smile. "Well, I've seen this in the future. I know what those trees and shrubs are going to look like when they're fully grown. Everything is in its infant stages right now. You might think of it as a child that has yet to reach maturity. Children are cute, but it isn't until they grow up that they become handsome or beautiful. It's a shame I didn't take a picture and bring it with me so you could see it. You'd be happy with the way things turned out."

The reference to a picture made him think she had something other than a drawing or painting in mind, but even if she tried to explain it to him, he probably wouldn't completely grasp what kind of picture she meant. The future had inventions he couldn't even imagine.

"With all that said," she continued, "this place is much better when it's full of activity. In the future, it just seems to be sitting here, as if it's waiting for something. Or someone." She shrugged. "Maybe it was."

Intrigued by the prospect, he asked, "Do you think it was waiting for you?"

"I wouldn't be so egotistical as to suggest that."

"Egotistical?" he interrupted before she could continue with her next thought.

"It means self-centered."

"Ah. You mean, arrogant."

Her eyes grew wide. "I prefer to think of it in nicer terms than arrogant, but yes, one might think of it that way."

"Well, time didn't move forward for me until you came here. This place could have been waiting for you to come here. You and I are the only two people who've ever been trapped here. We're the only ones who see the magic."

"There are three others, but they're now animals."

"Granted, that's true, but if they did leave this property when time stopped for me, they weren't able to return until you came here. You must be important for some reason."

A worried frown crossed her face. "I don't like the sound of that."

“Why not?”

“Because it implies that I have something to do with the magic.”

“You do. And I do as well. You and I are the only ones who can’t leave.”

“Maybe we can leave today.”

“We might be able to, but there’s a reason why we weren’t able to leave yesterday or any of the other times we tried to leave.”

She paused then let out an exasperated sigh. “I hate the line of your reasoning, especially since I have no idea what to do about the magic on this property.”

“I don’t know what to do about it, either, but there might be something we can do together that we couldn’t do apart. Maybe there’s a reason you could enter this time. Whatever this thing with magic is about, it started with me on the first day it was June 17. Since then, time went on without me until you came here.”

“Yes, that makes the most sense.”

It did. He was sure that her coming here changed things in his favor. Whatever curse had been holding him to the same day had been broken. On impulse, he reached forward and put his hand over hers. “I haven’t had hope in a very long time. Now I do. I know you sacrificed much to come here. I don’t take that for granted. It makes me all the more grateful for you.”

A blush crept up her face, and he was struck by how lovely she looked. He had noticed how attractive she was before, but something about this moment seemed to make her even more so. He offered her a shy smile then removed his hand and straightened up on the horse.

He cleared his throat. “We should go to the bridge and see if we can finally leave. Do you feel comfortable enough on the horse to keep going?”

She offered a nod, and since he had nothing else to say to ease the sudden awkwardness that had fallen between them, he urged his horse to resume the leisurely pace it’d been using just moments before.

When they arrived at the bridge, they came to a stop. He took a deep breath and released it. “Well, this is it. I’ll help you down from the horse.”

He got off of his horse and went to her.

“Aren’t you worried that Golden Ember will run off?” Willow asked him.

“Golden Ember is a good horse,” he replied. “He doesn’t go anywhere without me. Scarlet Glow is just as well mannered.” He held his hands up to her.

She released the reins then took his hands. She started to lean forward and ended up slipping, so he hurried to catch her before she fell to the ground.

She grunted but managed to steady her footing in short time. “Thanks,” she muttered as she straightened the bottom of her riding outfit where the fabric had wound around her boots.

Noting how red her face was, he said, “Don’t be embarrassed. That could happen to anyone who isn’t used to getting off a horse.” And he certainly hadn’t minded it. She was just as soft and curvy as she looked.

“Yeah, I guess.” She straightened up. “This never happens with a car.”

“Next time, you’ll do better.”

She grimaced. “One can only hope. I still wish I could ride like you do. You look more secure in the saddle.”

He had no idea if he was more secure or not since he’d never ridden in a sidesaddle, but his mother had seemed to manage it fine. Willow was probably just experiencing a wave of apprehension about it because this was new to her. Once she got used to it, he bet she’d enjoy it.

“I’m here with you,” he assured her. “I won’t let anything bad happen to you.” He took the reins to both horses. “I’ll follow you.”

Willow glanced at the bridge. “I don’t know if I should get my hopes up or not.” She lifted the hem of her riding outfit and walked to it. “We’ll be disappointed if we’re still trapped here.”

He followed her. “I won’t be all that pleased about it, but I’m too relieved to be in a new day to care all that much about being stuck here.” Though, he was sure that given the passing of enough days, he’d start to care.

“I don’t like being stuck anywhere,” she said. “I like knowing I can come and go as I want.”

He considered asking her if she was upset with being stuck here in the past with him but decided against it. It wouldn’t change anything. There was no way for her to return to her own time. She might as well get used to being here.

She reached the center of the bridge and glanced back at him. “Wish me luck.”

“I wish you luck,” he replied.

She shot him a surprised look. “You’re supposed to say, ‘Good luck’.”

“Oh. Good luck.”

She seemed satisfied with that, and he found himself smiling. Ever since he’d met her, she had demonstrated an odd way of talking at times, but he surmised that had to do with the fact that she was from the future. Language was one of those things that changed with time. At least they both spoke English, so he could understand most of what she said. It was all the better that she was enjoyable to be around.

Next to him, his horse let out a neigh as if it could read his mind. He frowned and studied his stallion. Golden Ember couldn't possibly read his mind. Willow had said nothing about animals reading minds, nor did she say this particular horse had been in the future with her. No. Golden Ember was just a regular horse. He relaxed and turned his attention back to her.

She put her hand up to the space where the invisible barrier had been yesterday. A wave of pink and purple colors rippled from her hand. She let out a frustrated groan. So, she was unable to get across the bridge. He couldn't say he was surprised.

Sure he was going to end up with the same result, he led the horses up to the spot next to her and put his hand up to the barrier. The same colors rippled out around him and traveled the length of the moat. He tried other areas, and the same thing happened. As before, he was unable to penetrate the barrier anywhere.

"So much for luck," Willow said.

"At least the servants can come and go," he told her. "They can bring things for us as we need them, and I have more than enough money since Francis is investing some of it for me. He's good when it comes to investing. We won't lack anything." Since that didn't seem to completely make her feel better, he added, "Maybe there's something in those books and journals my grandfather left behind to let us know how to get out of here."

That brought a newfound hope to her eyes. "All right."

"We'll study what my grandfather left behind after we have lunch," he said. "And don't forget the three animals in the stables. They might be a link to something, too."

"Yes, that's true. There has to be a reason why they're here."

Since there was nothing else to do at the bridge, he helped her onto the saddle of her horse then hopped up on his horse.

She let out a disgusted grunt, and he turned his gaze to her. "What is it?" he asked.

"I couldn't help but notice how easy you made getting on your horse look," she replied.

He grinned. "I've been riding since I was a lad. When you've been doing this for years, you don't even think about it. You'll get used to it."

He thought he heard her mutter, "Not without pants I won't," but since she was focused on staying on the horse, he decided not to reply in case he distracted her and she lost confidence.

She was willing to keep riding, and that was what mattered. Over the centuries, he had wanted to give up, but he kept trudging through the days. One right after another until he was sure he was going to lose his sanity. But he hadn't lost his sanity. He was still here, and that

time in his life had finally—mercifully—passed. Like the rain once it stopped, things were better. He had no doubt that Willow would adjust to being in this time. Eventually, riding a horse, even in a sidesaddle, would be something she'd do without thinking about it.

Chapter Sixteen

Willow set the book down and yawned. She turned from where she'd been reclining in a chair and glanced at the clock. It was almost five in the afternoon. She looked down at the page she was on. She'd only made it halfway into the tome, and she didn't know what information she could possibly use, which made it difficult to know what parts she should pay attention to and which she shouldn't.

The reading was dry and boring. It was like a documentary meant to put a person to sleep. She'd thought once she was done with school, she was never going to have to subject herself to learning this way ever again.

If Julian's grandfather had kept this book, though, there had to be a reason for it. But how much in this thing was even real? The author of the book had presented a lot of theories about leprechauns, but even he didn't know if any could be believed. She was surprised there was over 400 pages worth of information about this particular mythical creature.

She marked her place in the book and stood up so she could stretch.

"Did you find anything interesting?" Julian asked from where he sat at the desk with an open journal and some paper sprawled out in front of him.

"Not really. I'm taking a break." She walked to the desk and saw that Julian was making notes. "What are you working on?"

"A timeline of my grandfather's activities." He put the quill into the inkwell. "He was gone a lot. My grandmother wasn't happy about it, but he was determined to find a fairy, and from what I can tell, he decided the only place he was going to find one was in Ireland. So he did some research, went to Ireland, came back for more research, and went back. So far, I have him doing this for six years."

Willow couldn't believe what she was hearing. "He believed fairies were real?"

"He did. I've come to the conclusion he was either right or he was a madman. From how meticulous he was about keeping track of everything he was doing, I'm inclined to think he was right."

"You think there are fairies?"

"There might be. There might even be leprechauns. I wouldn't have believed any of it before I spent two centuries stuck here, but it's hard to deny the possibility."

"I suppose if magic exists, then things that we grew up believing were fake can exist, too."

Julian took out another journal and opened it. "Look at this. He

made up his own maps based on everything he read. He was sure one of these would lead him to the *Faerie Stiobhard Sept*. That was supposed to be one of the group of fairies who inhabited wooded areas. He was very specific about the one he needed."

"Just how many fairies did he think there were?"

"A lot. He wrote there were more fairies in Ireland than there were people, and they could be anywhere. They were able to mask their dwellings from the idle passerby who didn't know what he was looking for."

"What do you need to look for in order to find them?"

"He hasn't said yet," he replied. "I don't even know if he was successful or not in finding them. All I know is that he was extremely thorough and willing to spend the family's fortune on this quest. He was like an obsessed gentleman."

"That sounds foolish. Even if you think there is a fairy, why waste all of your money trying to find one?"

"He didn't explain why he wanted to find the fairy. At least, not yet. Did you find anything helpful in *Leprechauns and Gold*?"

"I don't know. I think the author of the book is more interested in exploring the origin of the leprechaun myth than presenting anything he believes is true. He goes into a lot of detail about the different legends about them. Depending on what story you want to believe, they can be playful and fun or downright evil and cruel. There's no one consensus about them. To be honest, I don't think the author believed in any of those stories, though he presents the book as nonfiction."

He leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. "There are times I don't even recognize what's normal and what's not. Sometimes I wonder if London even exists. What if there is nothing beyond the barrier? I know we can see past the bridge, but what if that's an illusion? What if nothing is really there?"

She shivered. That was even more frightening than being stuck here. The three crewmen who were now animals were bound here through some magic. She had no idea where Violet was or how she was connected to them. All she knew was that they didn't like her. But they had been able to leave the property and come back. Mr. Thompson had brought her here, and he'd left and returned without any problems.

Reassured by that, she said, "London still exists. The people out there still exist." Recalling that she had been able to come to this property in the future, she added, "Time still exists out there. I came here from the future. I flew into London. If everything ceased to exist out there, how would I have made it here?"

"You made it in the timeline that passed on without me," he

replied. “My cousin came here and couldn’t find me or any of the servants. This property and the things on it still existed. But the servants and I seemed to have disappeared. You told me that yourself.”

Yes, that was true. Mr. Thompson had told her the tragic ending Julian’s cousin faced in her timeline. “What about the coachman? He left here with that letter you wrote to your cousin.”

“He might have left, but does he still exist here in this timeline, or was he removed from this world we are in and slipped into an alternate world where you will one day be born?”

She thought over his words. She supposed this was a parallel time period. It was possible that meant they were in a parallel universe or something equally bizarre. But she really didn’t want to entertain that idea. It was just too horrific to think about. “London has to be out there. The rest of the world has to still be out there. It’s not possible that we’re stuck in some kind of limbo where we’re the only people who exist.”

“Even though magic has us trapped here? What do we know about magic? There must be rules to it.”

“But we’re in a different day. My coming here changed things. You said so yourself.”

He considered her words and softly said, “I did say that. Things are different. It’s just impossible to know how they are different. I can’t even be sure if the coachman will find my cousin. This timeline you started up might not be the same one my cousin was in. What if he is still going to die because he comes here and finds me and the servants missing? What if something bad happened to the coachman? What if he passed some barrier where nothing exists and just vanished?”

“You can’t think that way.” Seriously, if he kept it up, he was going to scare her. “Thinking the worst will do no good. You’re no longer trapped in the same day. Things are better. We shifted something in the magic. My coming here triggered something. That means we’re not passive in this whole magic thing. We can do something about our situation we couldn’t before.” She glanced at the books and journals. “The answer has to be in them somewhere. Your grandfather seemed obsessed, but he knew something no one else did, and he probably left these behind with the hope it would help us. More specifically, you. I don’t think I’m a direct part of this.”

“He might not have thought you’d be, but you are since you’re the one who made time resume for me.”

“All because I pulled down a sheet from what I thought was a mirror. Anyone else who did that could have done the same thing.” She tapped her foot on the floor and thought over the things she had learned in the past two days. “All right. So I’m here. That means I can

help. It means you're not alone. Two heads are better than one, right? Between the two of us, we're going to figure a way off of this property, and then we'll know what's beyond this place."

After a long moment, he nodded. "That sounds like the best way to proceed."

"At least it gives us something to focus on."

There was a knock at the partly open door, and the two turned to face it.

"Dinner is ready, my lord and Miss Knudson," the butler said.

Julian looked at her. "We'll focus on it after we eat."

Feeling better, she smiled. She was sure the world still existed in this timeline even though they were bound to this property. It had to be. To think otherwise would drive her insane. She couldn't imagine being stuck on this property for the rest of her life. Sure, it might be a nice place to stay and she was enjoying her time with Julian, but at some point, they had to be able to cross the bridge and be a part of the rest of the world. She just couldn't let her mind contemplate the other possibility. Maybe Julian had been strong enough to stay in limbo for two centuries, but she wasn't. Somehow, someway, they were going to figure out how to break the magic barrier.

Three days later, Julian was about three-fourths of the way through his grandfather's journals. At times, progress was slowed down by having to reference the maps his grandfather had drawn. Most were maps of the same area of Ireland. Only the slight variations in each map distinguished one from another. His grandfather hadn't just done broad outlines of the different sections of Ireland. He had gone into detail, marking every hill, cave, river, valley, and wooded area.

Willow had already read through the books his grandfather had saved over the years. She probably knew far more about the Irish myths and legends than anyone else in London at this point. He had anticipated reading the books himself, but the task of sorting through his grandfather's journals had taken up far more time than he'd expected.

More often than not, Willow would stay in the room with him, but sometimes, she would venture off to another room when she was exhausted from reading. The servants still didn't seem all that thrilled to have her there. To their credit, though, they were mindful of their duties and treated her with the same respect one would treat a noble lady.

Julian supposed Willow was nobility since she had been the rightful heir to this place in her time. It was just a shame there had

been no living male relative to pass the title to. As a lady, she couldn't become an earl. Maybe titles weren't meant to last forever. Maybe, at some point, they all ended up becoming extinct.

Willow entered the room with a riding outfit. "We've been cooped up in this room for too long. I insist you take me horseback riding."

He felt a smile tug at his lips. "You insist?"

"I'm not insisting in a bad way," she said, offering him a smile that hinted at flirtation. "Look at how beautiful it is out there. The morning rain shower is gone, and the sun is out." She went to the open window and took a deep breath, and though he tried not to notice, her breasts stood out more prominently. "There's nothing like the way things smell after it rains, and it's nice and warm out there. I'm telling you, you don't want to miss it by being stuck in here all day."

He chuckled. "You must be bored if you're this excited about going for another ride on a horse."

"Well, there is no such thing as the internet or TV in this time."

"Internet or TV?"

"Exactly." She returned to him and gave him a pointed look. "You have no idea what I'm talking about. And while I could read another book, my eyes need a break. I've read so much in the last couple of days that the words are starting to blur together."

"You might need spectacles." When her eyebrows furrowed, he explained, "Special glasses to put on your face so you can read the words clearly."

"Oh! I know what you're talking about. In my time, they're called glasses."

Surprised, his gaze went to the glasses next to the decanter. Why would anyone call spectacles 'glasses'?

She tapped his arm in a playful gesture. "Come on. Those journals will still be here when we return. Unlike June 17, you won't get another chance to live this day again."

He glanced at the parchment he'd been writing on and then the journals he had open all around him. She was right. He needed to remember there was more to life than searching for fairies. His grandfather had become so obsessed with it that his grandmother couldn't take it anymore and took their two sons to London. Their marriage hadn't been the same after that. Before then, his grandfather had seemed to have a normal life. He had loved his wife, and from the way his grandfather had written about her early on in the journals, she had loved him as well. She and their two sons were the most important people in his life. And then something happened that made him obsess over Ireland and fairies. He became so focused on his quest that he was like a gentleman who'd been possessed.

Julian didn't want to get so caught up in the magic binding him and Willow to this property that he wasted the rest of the life he had. He would age now. The passage of time would affect him like it affected everyone who progressed from one day to the next.

"All right," he said as he marked his place. "I can come back to this later."

"Good! I was hoping you'd say yes. I'll wait in the drawing room while you change clothes."

He offered her a nod, and she left the room. He couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. He'd been sure the last thing she'd want to do was ride a horse, but he supposed if she was bored enough, she could be convinced to give it another try. And, if he was honest with himself, he'd rather go horseback riding with her than stay in a room all day.

He got up from his chair and hurried to change outfits.

Chapter Seventeen

Willow found it easier to ride Scarlet Glow the second time around. Good. Maybe she would manage better in this time period than she initially thought she would. She was starting to get used to the gowns, and she had to admit that the time and attention her lady's maid spent decorating her hair did make her feel like a model about to hit the runway or to be photographed for a magazine. It was enough to make up for the lack of a flushing toilet and hot shower.

This time, Julian led her around the back of the property. Unlike her first horseback ride, she noticed that the cat followed behind, stopping once in a while to run after whatever had distracted him, only to run and catch up with them a few minutes later. Then she noticed that the owl flew from one tree to another. A couple of times, she focused in on them to see if there was something they wanted to communicate with her, but they didn't give any indication that they had a message to give her. Instead, they seemed more intent on finding out where she and Julian were going. Maybe she should have taken Julian's father's horse for a ride. Maybe he would have liked to be a part of this.

"I wonder if I should ride your father's horse next time," Willow told Julian.

Julian glanced over at her, eyebrows raised. "You don't like Scarlet Glow?"

"I like her, but the animals who were human men in my time are following us," she said in a voice low enough to prevent them from hearing her. "They didn't follow us last time. What makes this time different?"

Julian shrugged. "I have no idea what to think about them. My grandfather didn't put anything in the journals about the animals on this land."

His answer didn't surprise her, though she had read of a few myths and legends of shapeshifters. But the cat, owl, and horse weren't the type of shapeshifter that seemed able to change their form on their own. They hadn't become human since she'd been in this time. They looked the exact same as they had three days ago when she first saw them. Whatever had caused them to become human had to be something else. If she had to guess, she'd say Violet had used the magic to accomplish the feat.

"Did your grandfather mention anything about a woman named Violet in his journals?" she asked.

"No, I haven't seen that name anywhere. I remember you mentioning her. You said she was with the animals who were human

in your time." He glanced over at the cat that was still keeping its distance from them. "I don't see what use she had for them."

"They maintained the property. I suppose they were doing so all along, though no one realized they never aged. If they came from this time, they had to be pretty much immortal to still be around in my time. To me, they were middle-aged men. They looked well under two centuries old." After a moment, she added, "If they are here, then she has to be, too, right? I mean, it stands to reason she would come with them."

"I've never met anyone named Violet."

"Maybe she's an animal. Maybe she's not in human form."

"With everything else that's happened, I'd say it's a definite possibility, but I wouldn't even know where to find her."

"I wouldn't, either. None of the animals remind me of her."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes until she caught sight of a rainbow that spanned across the sky and seemed to disappear behind a hill in the distance.

"Two of the books I read said that there's supposed to be a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow," she mused.

"It's impossible to get to the end of a rainbow. The thing goes on forever."

"Maybe it just seems that way. According to one of the books, leprechauns change the location of rainbows to deter anyone from getting too close to their gold."

"If there's any truth in that story, then there's no point in going after one to find gold."

"A couple of the myths claim that people managed to find them. One man caught a leprechaun, and since the leprechaun had to give him three wishes, he wished to get to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The leprechaun brought him there, but the gold was buried under a tree. The man didn't have a shovel. Since all he wanted was gold, he let the leprechaun go free. Then he marked the tree so he wouldn't forget where it was and went to get a shovel. But this leprechaun was sneaky, so when the man returned, there were a bunch of trees, and all had the same mark on them. The moral of the story is that trying to get rich quick doesn't work."

Julian glanced at the rainbow and then turned his gaze back to her. "You think there might be some truth to the story?"

"I don't think all of the things in those books were true. I think some might be, or at least some element of truth in them are based on real incidents. Over time, stories get retold, and as they get retold, details change."

He nodded to indicate his agreement.

"I suppose it's not wise to be too logical when magic is involved,

though," Willow added. "There are some things that can't be explained, even though they're very real."

Her gaze went back to the rainbow. From where they were, it didn't seem to change its course. It seemed to be standing still. If she and Julian could leave the property, she might make an effort to track it down to the end just to see if it would veer off its current path.

The cat let out a loud meow, and the owl hooted. Surprised, she pulled the reins of her horse so she could focus in on them.

The cat looked at her, meowed again, and darted in the direction of the gazebo. Overhead, the owl flew above her and Julian. After a couple of seconds, she realized it was following the cat.

"I guess we better go with them," she told Julian before leading her horse toward the gazebo.

She continued riding at her slow pace. Just because the cat and owl seemed to be in a hurry, it didn't mean she had to be. There was still the matter of not falling off of the horse to contend with.

"I wonder what it is about the gazebo that has their attention," Julian said.

"I don't know, but it's not purple in this time. It's pink."

"Is that important?"

"It might be since the cat and owl want us to go to it. I don't recall them being interested in it in the future. But then, I hadn't been paying attention to what they were doing." Maybe that had been a mistake on her part. But how could she know they had been changed into people and allowed to go through the centuries untouched by the hand of time?

When she and Julian reached the gazebo, Julian got down from his horse and secured the reins to a nearby post. Then he helped her down. Once again, she noticed the pleasant warmth that crept through her at his touch. Unable to make eye contact with him, she started to take a step back, but when she realized he didn't let go of her, she stopped and looked up at him.

He seemed to be ready to say something when the cat let out an impatient meow. They jerked and turned to the cat. It let out another meow and headed for the gazebo. From above, the owl circled around the gazebo and hooted.

"I suppose we should see what's so important about this gazebo," Julian whispered in her ear.

The feel of his breath made her shiver in pleasure. If being with him this way made her feel as if her body had just come alive, she could only imagine what kissing him would be like. That was, if a kiss was going to come. For a moment there, she really thought he was going to kiss her.

He released her. "I'll tie your horse to the post then join you."

She was tempted to tell the cat that his timing was horrible. Couldn't he have waited until Julian kissed her before insisting they go to the gazebo? But then, she was dealing with a cat. Even if he had at one time been human, that didn't mean he had experienced the fluttery feelings of wanting to kiss like people did.

Sighing, she settled for quietly following the cat into the gazebo.

Besides the fact that the interior was pink like the outside, there was nothing that made it different from what she'd seen in her time.

Her gaze went to the cat, which meowed at her as it hopped onto a bench. The owl hooted and flew to the top rail above the bench the cat was on.

She heard Julian come into the gazebo behind her, and she felt as if an electric current passed through her. It was the same sensation she'd experienced when she stepped through the barrier connecting her time with Julian's. She gasped and looked over at Julian to make sure he was still there. Thankfully, he was. She put her hand over her heart.

"Did you feel that, too?" he asked her.

She nodded. "I felt it when I crossed through the portal in the hallway. I was afraid one of us just went to another time."

His eyebrows furrowed, and he started to leave the gazebo. She started to protest that he shouldn't tempt fate just in case he disappeared, but he crossed the threshold. The electric current swept through her again before she realized that he was still with her. He was just standing outside the gazebo.

"Did you feel it that time?" he called out.

"I did." She scanned the area. "Everything looks the same as it did before. How do things look from where you're standing?"

He inspected the landscape around them. "It looks the same to me, too. I'm going to come back in. You tell me if anything around us changes."

She took a deep breath. He hadn't disappeared yet, so chances were they weren't going to lose each other. Even as she told herself this, she still experienced a wave of apprehension as he crossed the threshold.

The feeling passed through her a third time. Thankfully, he was still in front of her. "Come over here." She waved for him to join her.

As he approached her, she felt better. It was better if they didn't separate while in the gazebo. Just in case.

With a look around the landscape, she said, "Nothing's changed. I only felt a strange electric current as you walked in and out of the gazebo."

"Electric current? Is that what it's called?"

"It's what I call it. For all I know, there could be a magical term for

it."

The cat let out another meow, and they directed their attention to the spot on the bench where the cat was pawing.

She frowned and whispered, "Do you see anything on the bench next to the cat?"

"No," he whispered back. "The space looks empty."

It *looked* empty. Just as the barrier around the moat *looked* invisible. She walked over to it and touched the space. "I don't feel anything."

The cat meowed and touched a spot that was a foot above the bench. His paw seemed to be tapping something, though she couldn't hear anything to indicate a box, or something similar, that might be there.

She put her hand where the cat was tapping. She shook her head. "I don't feel anything," she told the cat. Her hand went up and down the entire space.

Julian joined her and put his hand near hers.

And that was when she saw it. A wooden box with iron bars that was holding a small winged creature.

Willow shrieked and withdrew her hand. Julian, also startled, jerked back. They both backed up, and as they did so, they bumped into each other. At once, red and gold streams of light pulsed in waves around them. Willow jerked again, and in doing so, she inched away from Julian. The red and gold colors vanished.

She stared at Julian, who seemed as surprised as she was.

The owl flew on top of the box, which was now invisible, and hooted.

"Did you see a small person with wings in a box?" Willow asked Julian.

"I did. I also saw colors swirl around us when we touched each other."

"Yes, I saw that, too."

Though he seemed tentative about it, he lightly touched her arm, and at once, the red and gold colors vibrated through the gazebo. "This is like what we saw at the bridge when we both touched the barrier together."

He was right. She took a deep breath and released it. "We must possess some magical qualities in order for this to happen. And there must be something about us touching that makes it appear, at least in an area where magic is at work. Obviously, we don't create these colors all the time."

He let go of her and the colors vanished. "I think that's a fairy in that cage. I didn't get a good look at it, but it was tiny with wings. It's hiding in plain sight. My grandfather said they could be right in front

of you, and you wouldn't know it unless you knew where to look."

"Or unless you had magic. Something happened when we both were touching that space." She gestured to the spot under the owl.

They directed their attention back to the spot. Was it possible his grandfather had succeeded in finding a fairy? If so, why bring it here? What purpose could there be in having one in this gazebo?

"This fairy could be why we're trapped here," she said.

"Do you think if we let it out of the cage, we could leave this property?"

"I think it's worth trying. But we're going to have to do it together."

He took her hand in his. At once, the red and gold colors swirled around them. She directed her gaze to the spot under the owl and saw the cage.

The owl hooted and flew to the place on the bench that was next to the cat. Both animals seemed intent on watching them. Willow didn't know why, but that only made her more nervous.

She and Julian knelt in front of the bench and peered into the cage. Sure enough, a fairy was inside of it. The red and gold swirls didn't touch the cage, allowing her to see the fairy's green hair and clothes. While she could see its wings, the wings had only a hint of green in them. For the most part, the wings appeared clear. The fairy was sitting in the center of the cage, and it was looking at them with a hopeful expression.

"She can see us," Julian whispered.

"Are you sure it's a she?" Willow whispered back.

"She has long hair."

The length of hair didn't mean anything. There were plenty of men in her time who had long hair. Also, this was a fairy. It could be that they all had long hair. The books she'd read hadn't gone into detail about how they looked. There were descriptions of small creatures with wings, but that was about it.

She glanced at the owl and cat to see if they would give her an idea of what they should do, but the animals only watched her and Julian.

"I think it's up to us to do something," she whispered to Julian.

He brought his free hand to the cage, and she braced herself for whatever was going to happen. But, as it turned out, nothing happened because his hand just went through it.

The fairy let out a sigh of disappointment and buried its face in its hands.

"How is that possible?" Willow asked. She brought her free hand to the cage, and it went right through the iron bars and the fairy. The fairy gave no indication that it felt Willow's hand pass right through

it.

"Maybe if we both put our hands on the cage at the same time, we can touch it," Julian said.

"Sounds good to me. Let's try it."

They placed their hands on the top of the cage at the same time. She could feel the smooth wood.

"It worked," she said in surprise.

The fairy lowered its hands and turned its hopeful gaze back to them. Willow noticed the feminine features on the fairy's face and realized Julian had been right. This was a female fairy.

"There has to be a way to open the cage," Julian said. Keeping his hold on her other hand, he stood up and studied the top and sides of the cage. "I found it. It's back here." He nodded toward the side of the cage that was facing the wall of the gazebo. "Help me turn the cage."

Willow did as he wished, and they managed to turn the cage around so that the door was facing them.

Recalling that some legends reported fairies talking to humans, Willow asked her, "Can you talk?"

The fairy shook her head.

Willow's eyebrows furrowed. "You can't talk, but you can understand me?"

The fairy nodded.

"Was there anything in those books about fairies being able to talk?" Julian asked Willow.

"Well, there was nothing concrete."

"Concrete?"

Willow searched for a word he would be familiar with and finally settled for, "Definite."

"Oh."

Willow touched the iron bars which, to her surprise, gave off a faint pink and purple glow that lasted for a second.

"That's similar to what we see at the bridge," Julian said.

"I noticed that. We're trapped on this property like the fairy is trapped in here." Except this was worse because the fairy couldn't do anything but just sit in this cage. At least she and Julian had the manor and the whole property at their disposal.

"Was there anything about pink and purple colors in the books?" Julian asked.

"No. Unfortunately, there was nothing about any colors unless we're dealing with green leprechauns or red far darrig. The far darrig is the leprechaun's evil twin. But in regards to fairies, there is no specific color dedicated to them. That makes them harder to find. They could be anywhere. Most people miss them." Willow studied the bars. "These are made of iron, aren't they?"

He touched the bars, and the same pink and purple glow pulsed through them. “Yes, they’re made of iron.”

“I remember something about fairies being vulnerable to iron. There was another metal they have trouble with, too.” She thought for a moment. “Was it aluminum?”

The fairy shook her head.

Willow’s eyes widened. “It’s not aluminum?”

The fairy shook her head.

“I could have sworn there was another metal fairies don’t like.” She studied the fairy. “Is it copper?”

The fairy shook her head.

“Steel?” Julian suggested.

The fairy nodded. Then she pointed to the bars around her and gave an expression that implied she’d get hurt if she touched them.

“Do these iron bars hurt you?” Willow asked.

The fairy nodded.

Well, that would keep any fairy from trying to get out of this cage.

“Who put you in here?” Julian asked.

The fairy opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was some gibberish Willow didn’t understand. She glanced at Julian and noted that he didn’t understand it, either.

“Even if we don’t know how she got in there, maybe we can get her out,” Julian said.

He pulled on the door, but it didn’t budge. Willow tried to help him, thinking if they did it together, they’d be able to do it, but the door remained locked. In fact, the pink and purple glow only intensified as if strengthening the door.

The fairy crumpled to the floor of the cage. At first, Willow thought they’d somehow harmed her, but when she saw the fairy’s tears, she realized the poor thing was crying.

“This is terrible,” Willow said. “She’s a prisoner in there, and we can’t get her out.”

The owl hooted in disappointment, and the cat jumped down from the bench. The two animals left the gazebo.

“That can’t be it,” Julian said. “We have to be able to do something.”

The fairy let out a wailful moan then cried harder.

Willow didn’t know what they could do. There was no lock, so they couldn’t look for a key. The door was sealed with magic.

“I’ll have to go through the books again,” she said. “When I read them the first time, I wasn’t looking for anything specific. This time, I know what to pay attention to.”

After a moment, Julian nodded. “I’ll read one of the other books. It’ll make things go faster.” He turned his gaze to the fairy. “We’re

sorry. We would release you from that cage right now if we could. But we're not giving up. We're going to look for an answer, and we're going to look for it as soon as we get back to the manor." He started to get up but then turned back to the fairy. "We're going back to the manor right now."

Willow didn't know if the fairy took any comfort in that since they didn't know if the answer would be in one of those books, but at least Julian was trying to help. She squeezed his hand to show her appreciation. He glanced at her and offered her a hopeful smile.

This seemed like a setback in solving their problems, but in reality, they were closer to the answer than they were before.

She stood up with Julian, and still holding her hand, Julian led her out of the gazebo. Though he didn't let go of her hand the entire time, the red and gold swirls stopped vibrating around them once they passed the threshold of the gazebo.

She thought he might let go of her hand now that the colors were gone, but to her pleasure, he didn't. Did this mean he really would have kissed her if the cat hadn't interrupted them? Her heartbeat picked up at the thought. Perhaps the attraction wasn't as one-sided as she'd assumed.

Julian paused as they made their way from the gazebo, and her steps came to a stop so she wouldn't have to break contact with him. When she realized he had glanced back at the gazebo, she looked over her shoulder. The gazebo looked normal. No one would know there was a fairy locked in a cage in there.

Willow frowned as her mind took another turn, one that was far less romantic. In her time, had the fairy been there? She recalled going to the gazebo. Had she sat right next to the fairy and not realized it? The gazebo had been painted purple in her time. If the fairy was connected to the fact that she was unable to leave the property in the future, then the fairy must have been there, right? It was here now, and both she and Julian were stuck here.

When she and Julian had touched the cage, it glowed a mixture of pink and purple colors. The gazebo was pink in this time. The barrier keeping her and Julian here was pink and purple. Was there a connection between the colors and magical entrapments?

"I think pink and purple indicate a curse," she said. "It seems that every time we touch something that vibrates pink and purple colors, we can't get past it. Or, in the case of the cage, open it. Those colors, or the magic associated with those colors, seem to be an obstacle to us."

"The fairy was affected, too."

"I don't know if the fairy was affected because of that or the iron bars. Iron is a fairy's weakness."

“Maybe it’s the iron and the colors pink and purple.”

She thought over his statement and nodded. “Yes, there’s probably some truth in that. In the future, the gazebo is purple, but in this time, it’s pink. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

“It could be a calling card.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “A calling card?”

“We use them in this time to announce a social visit. It can let someone know you arrived in London or request a visit. Whoever, or whatever, is behind this magic doesn’t seem friendly. And in this case, the colors serve as an announcement of some kind.”

Willow thought over what he said. “Can a name be a calling card?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “You mean Violet?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? The word ‘violet’ indicates a particular shade of purple. Violet was in charge of maintaining this place in the future with the cat, owl, and horse when they were in human form.”

“We’d be wise to pay careful attention to anything pink or purple around us, including anyone who goes by the name of a color,” Julian said after a long moment.

Yes, they would.

He led her to her horse, and after he helped her get on the saddle, he went to his horse. She watched him, torn between the newfound feelings she was developing for him and her heartache over the poor fairy who was confined to a cage for what just might have been a very long time. Was it wrong to want to explore a romantic relationship while a fairy was in such despair?

But what could they do about the fairy? There was no key, and they couldn’t open the door. They would have released her if they’d been able to. She didn’t think they would find any answers in those books. While the authors mentioned iron being a fairy’s weakness, she didn’t recall anything about getting a fairy out of a cage with iron bars.

She sighed. Life wasn’t simple to begin with, but adding magic to it only complicated things more.

Julian brought his horse over to her. “We’ll figure something out. I know it looks hopeless, but I don’t think it is. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from reading my grandfather’s journals, it’s that there is hope. He was sure things would be made right. The answers we’re looking for are somewhere. I don’t know if they’re in the journals, the books, or somewhere else around here, but they are here. I’m certain of it.”

His confidence made her feel much better about leaving the fairy for now. They would get her out of the cage somehow.

For the time being, it wouldn’t hurt to give her attention to Julian. Even though she and Julian weren’t having the sordid love affair the servants assumed they were, being here with him had given her a

glimpse of what it might be like if she married him. And she liked it.

She urged her horse to ride back to the stables with him.

Chapter Eighteen

"Here it is," Willow said later that day as she and Julian were reading in the library on the settee. She leaned toward him so he could see what she'd found.

He turned to her.

"It says that iron is the natural enemy of fairies," Willow said. "It's why children's bedframes are often made of iron and why mothers leave something made of iron like scissors, a knife, or a fire tong near the cradle of an infant. The iron is thought to prevent a fairy from stealing the child and replacing it with a changeling."

Julian frowned. "Fairies aren't evil, are they?" From reading his grandfather's journals, he'd gotten the impression that fairies offered protection, rather than harm.

"The myths around them indicate they can be good or evil."

Julian's mind went back to the fairy in the gazebo. "I don't get the feeling that the fairy we saw was evil. She seemed to be as much a prisoner here as we are."

Willow nodded. "I don't think she's evil, either, especially considering the pink and purple colors that were keeping us from releasing her. Maybe Violet trapped her in that cage and is keeping her there to serve her purpose."

Julian hadn't considered that possibility. Perhaps he and Willow were being held here with the fairy for some dark purpose.

"Anyway," Willow continued as she glanced back at her book, "this is the first reference I remember coming across about fairies and iron. I'll keep looking for more. I know there's other things in this book about it. I just can't remember exactly where. It's not like there's a chapter dedicated specifically to iron."

Julian released his breath and turned his attention back to the book he was reading on fairies and leprechauns. It was ironic if one thought about it. This whole time, he'd been looking forward to being able to pass from one day to the next. He hadn't once bothered to consider what might happen if he did. He couldn't help but think that whoever Violet was, she had something planned for him and Willow.

But why? What made them so unique?

He glanced at the desk where he'd left his grandfather's journals and his notes about the things his grandfather had been doing. His grandfather had been obsessed with finding a fairy. He hadn't come out and said why. It almost seemed like he was afraid to admit what was happening. Whatever it was, his grandfather seemed to think if he didn't find that fairy, it was going to bring disaster to the family.

Could it be possible that his grandfather had succeeded and that

the fairy in the gazebo was the one he found?

No, that didn't seem right. That fairy was trapped in a cage that glowed pink and purple colors when he or Willow touched it. That had to be a fairy Violet had imprisoned. So had his grandfather found another one and brought it here? If so, was it also caged?

His gaze went to Willow. Her head was bowed over the book in her lap. Though he realized there were more important things to give his attention to, he took the moment to stare at her.

It was a pleasure just to watch her. The pleasure went beyond physical desire. Perhaps this was the beginning of love.

He wondered if this was what Francis felt when he looked at Lady Kimberly. Julian had thought Lady Kimberly was a kind lady, but nothing ever stirred up within him when she was around. There was something, however, that seemed to affect him when he was with Willow, and the more time he spent with her, the stronger the feeling became.

Willow glanced up from the book and turned her gaze in his direction. Eyes wide, she asked, "Is there something you found while reading?"

Face warm, he shook his head. "I was just taking a break. I'll get back to reading now."

Without waiting for her to respond, he forced his attention back to the book in front of him. He didn't consider himself to be shy around ladies. He'd talked and danced with plenty of them in London.

But none of them were Willow.

Ignoring the thought, he forced himself to read the words in front of him. He had promised the fairy he would search for a way to release her. The answer was somewhere. If it wasn't in a book or a journal, then it was somewhere within reach.

If we are able to free the fairy and ourselves from the curse binding us here, will Willow return to her time?

He stopped reading the book. He didn't like thinking that Willow might return to her time. Magic had brought her here, and it was continuing to keep her here. What if she had the option to go back to the future? Would she take it?

He didn't suppose it was possible for him to go with her if she had to go back. That thing in the hallway had only worked one way. Was it possible that she would choose to stay here with him? And if she could choose, would she? He was tempted to ask her about it. He even opened his mouth to ask. But, in the end, he turned his attention back to the book and continued to read.

“I wonder if there are any other places touched by magic on this property,” Willow said that evening after dinner.

This time, Julian was sitting at the desk with the candle next to him. She was sitting on the settee next to the candelabra. The book was open in front of her, but her gaze was directed at the window. He followed her gaze but didn’t see anything but the outline of the grass and trees in the moonlight.

She looked at him. “I didn’t see the entire property in the future. I only went for a walk around the manor. I don’t recall seeing anything else that was purple. But if I did, it wouldn’t stand out if it was small, would it?” Without waiting for him to respond, she added, “There were the purple nails!”

“Nails?”

“Yes, the ones holding the sheet that covered the mirror that turned out to be a portal between our times. But that was something evident, too. I noticed the sheet the first time I was in that hallway.” She paused, her expression thoughtful. “I searched all through this enormous house when I was in the future, and I don’t recall anything pink or purple except for the nails.”

“There were never nails holding up a sheet over that portal in all the years I’ve been here.”

“The sheet was meant for someone in the future to discover. I have no idea if it was there all along or if Violet waited to put it there when I was due to arrive. Though, if I recall right, the nails were old. If they were old, then that sheet had been there the entire time. I think everyone else ignored it. The only reason I removed it was because I was stuck on this property and got bored.”

“Or maybe you were able to remove the sheet because you signaled the end of the title.”

Her gaze returned to him. “Is a title really that important in England?”

“It’s a gentleman’s legacy. It’s the one thing he has to give to those who come after him.”

“I wonder why Greg Westmore wasn’t trapped here since he was the last man to hold the title. The lawyer only told me a little about him. I never even knew Greg, but I briefly remember the lawyer saying he was the last earl of the estate. I didn’t know what that meant at the time. Being the earl of anything didn’t make any sense to me. All I understood was that I was the next in line to inherit this estate. Greg did have a child. I think it was a boy, but the child died shortly after birth. After that, he and his wife divorced, and he never remarried. That’s all the lawyer told me about him.” She winced. “I’m sorry.”

He wondered if things would end up the same way if the

coachman managed to get the missive to Francis. He hoped the course of history would be different now. If Julian wasn't going to have children, then he hoped Francis would live to marry Lady Kimberly. If they married, it was very possible they'd have children. Perhaps the family line would continue through them.

That was, of course, if the world beyond this property still existed. Without someone coming here, it was impossible to know what was happening beyond the moat.

Since Willow turned her attention back to her book, Julian forced his gaze to the book he was reading. He finished the page he was on and turned it. His eyes widened in surprise. It was a map similar to the ones his grandfather had drawn. He brought the candle closer to the page and studied it. He recognized the general location of the Irish cities, but there were some areas marked on the page that indicated possible fairy septs. He was sure he'd seen one of these areas drawn in detail in one of his grandfather's journals.

He sorted through the journals until he found the one that contained the maps his grandfather had made. He sorted through each page in the journal until he noticed the one that matched the map in the book. Well, it wasn't an exact replica, but it was close.

He placed the journal right beside the book and marked the similarities and differences. South of Dublin were mountains. While the map mentioned possible fairy septs, the book didn't go further than that. His grandfather, however, had gone into more detail. It labeled the septs by name. Julian turned the page in the journal and saw that the next map focused in on one mountain in particular with a series of forests and rivers. His grandfather had given names to the forests and rivers that did not match anything he found in the book. Julian bet each forest was given a particular name that designated a specific family of fairies.

Julian recalled reading the entries about the trips his grandfather had taken to Ireland. His father had mentioned that Julian's grandfather loved to hike through the mountains. His father had also said Julian's grandmother had become increasingly upset with Julian's grandfather as time went on. His father had told Julian that she had termed the trips as "endless pursuits that led to nothing". Given the fact that Julian's grandfather had spent twenty-seven years doing this, Julian could understand why, but after seeing the fairy in the gazebo, he suspected his grandfather was desperate to save someone, or something, he loved.

There had to be something that linked his grandfather with Violet, if one could assume Violet hadn't aged any more than the three animals in the stables had. Could magic keep someone immortal?

The book did say that fairies could live for centuries, possibly even

a thousand or so years. They aged much slower than humans. Was it possible Violet was a fairy?

He looked over at Willow. “Can fairies become human?”

“No, they can’t become human, but according to some legends, they can masquerade as one.” Willow straightened up in the settee. “Violet can’t be a fairy. If she was, why not just work her magic directly on me and send me here? Why wait for me to walk through a magical mirror? Violet needed the help of the cat, owl, and horse to maintain the place. She was unable to do all of it on her own. And, we shouldn’t forget, she brought a fairy here and trapped it in a cage. A fairy wouldn’t have to go through all of this trouble when she could do the work herself. Whoever Violet is, she needed help to accomplish her goals. Whatever those goals are.”

Whatever those goals were, it involved him and Willow. And for some reason, they had to be here on this property and in this time.

“My grandfather must have known something about the fairy in the gazebo, or he knew Violet intended to bring the fairy here,” Julian said. “He spent almost thirty years searching for a fairy. He took a lot of trips to Ireland and made journals full of maps. Most of the things I’m finding are maps. I think he finally found a group of fairy families in the mountains just south of Dublin.”

“Do you think he actually found a fairy to help him?”

“Let me check something before I answer that question.”

He turned the page of the journal. He hadn’t seen it at the time, but it just occurred to him that the following pages in the journal right in front of him were maps of the same mountain but from different perspectives. He hadn’t gone through this entire journal yet, but as he flipped through it, he noticed his grandfather had marked areas where he had expected to find fairies, but those areas were crossed out. Fairies, it seemed, were extremely difficult to find.

Considering how one was hidden in a gazebo, invisible to the human eye, Julian could understand his grandfather’s frustration. Without the help of the cat and owl, he and Willow wouldn’t have even suspected the fairy was there.

He came toward the end of the journal and saw that the last few pages were blank. Surprised, he went to the last entry his grandfather had made. It was another map. The area his grandfather drew this time was a group of trees that were intersected by two different rivers. His grandfather had marked an arrow at the intersection.

There was nothing crossed out on this particular page. Julian checked the date on the last entry. His grandfather had made it four years before his death.

“I think he found the fairy he was looking for,” Julian told Willow.

She set the book aside and hurried over to him. “Where did he put

it?"

"I haven't found anything about that," he said. Afraid she'd be disappointed, he added, "I still haven't gone through the last journal. There might be something in it about what happened. I've been going through these journals in the order he wrote them. At first, his focus was on finding out everything he could about Ireland and the folklore over there. Then, he spent years drawing maps and traveling there. He filled up three journals' worth of maps. Then suddenly, he stopped. This is the last map he drew."

He moved the candle so that he could put the journal in front of her.

She leaned toward him, and he suddenly wondered what she would have done if he had kissed her earlier that day when they were at the gazebo. Would she had welcomed it? She hadn't pulled away from him when he kept holding her hand after they left the gazebo.

"I suppose the arrow indicates where he probably found the fairy," she said.

He forced his attention back to the map and cleared his throat. "I think so. He had arrows on the other maps, but those were crossed out."

"They were?" Before he could respond, she turned to the previous page in the journal.

He rose to his feet so he could get a better look at the page she was looking at. He pointed to the arrow that was among all the trees he had drawn. "He thought he could find one here, but the cross he marked through the spot he was looking at indicates he didn't. He made this map six months before he made this one." He turned the page to the last map his grandfather had done.

"I didn't notice that he posted dates in the lower corner of the pages." She turned to the previous pages and studied the dates. "They vary. Some are a year apart, and others are only months apart."

"Yes. I'm sure that's why my grandmother ended up going to London and taking my father and uncle with her."

"The poor man. He must have felt all alone. He knew something but couldn't tell anyone."

"The last journal has no maps in it. There's only words. I'm going to start on it tomorrow since it's late."

"That's a good idea. I'm too tired to read anything else. Nothing I've reread has told me how to get a fairy out of a cage. I don't know how we're going to get her out of there."

"If my grandfather found a fairy like we think, maybe he brought it here. Maybe that fairy can release her."

"I hope so."

Since there was nothing else to do for the evening, he blew out the

candle on his desk and closed the journal. All at once, his exhaustion began to catch up to him. It'd been a long day, and while he found some answers, there were still more questions.

There never seemed to be a lack of questions. The more he and Willow sought answers, the more questions there seemed to be.

He went to the candelabra on the table next to the place she'd been sitting and picked it up. Then he turned to face her. He took a moment to let his gaze sweep over her. It wasn't the first time he'd done so, but it was the first time he considered what it might be like if she was Lady Blackwell. She certainly looked the part in the gowns the maid had altered so that they fit her perfectly. Then there was the fact that the maid styled her hair in a manner befitting this century.

He recalled the strange clothes and hair style Willow had had when she crossed over into his time, and that image of her just didn't fit here. But she fit here now.

Perhaps they could change the future for the better. Already, he had done everything he could to warn Francis not to come here. That meant Francis should go on to live and marry Lady Kimberly. Maybe that meant Julian could go on to marry, too. A marriage with Willow would be very pleasant. Even if they always remained unable to leave the property, they could still make a life here together.

"Julian, are you okay?" Willow asked.

Bringing himself out of his thoughts, Julian forced his attention back to the present. He took a good look at her and noted the curious expression on her face. She really was lovely to look at. He'd like to have the pleasure of looking at her every day for the rest of his life.

He cleared his throat. "I'm fine." He took her by the arm and led her out of the room. "It's been a long day. We need to get a good night's sleep."

She nodded. "You're right. We do. I was starting to fall asleep while reading."

"Then it's good we stopped when we did."

They reached the stairs, and he noticed the way she leaned into him. If they were more comfortable with each other, he wondered if she would rest her head on his shoulder. He'd once spotted a lady doing that with her husband when a footman had opened the door of a carriage and thought it was a sweet gesture of affection. It was supposed to be private, of course. The lady hadn't intended for him to be passing by at the moment to see it. And he had thought that was all the more reason why the gentleman was fortunate.

He knew so little of his parents' marriage. His mother and father never said anything to make him think they didn't get along, but there had been a shadow that hovered over their marriage. Perhaps it had something to do with the duel his mother had called a foolish event in

his father's life.

A senseless thing, were his mother's exact words.

Had it been senseless, or had it been necessary?

The thought startled him, and he paused on the steps.

Willow stopped, too, and turned to look at him. "What is it? Did you forget something in the library?"

"No. I was just thinking about that duel my father was in. What if my father had to do it? What if he had no choice?"

"Well, you said a gentleman has to go into a duel when his reputation is at stake."

"Yes, but what if there was more than his reputation he was worried about?"

"Your father never spoke to you about the duel though, right?"

"Right, he didn't. It was only my mother who did, and she didn't tell me anything except it was senseless." He paused. "What if it only seemed senseless to her because he knew something she didn't? Maybe he couldn't say anything to her because she wouldn't have believed him. It's not like I'm about to go around this place and tell the servants there's a fairy trapped in the gazebo, that I can't leave this property because of an invisible barrier, or that you're from the future. They'd never believe any of it."

"But the butler did see us at the bridge."

"He saw us at the bridge, but he didn't see the colors we did, and he didn't feel the barrier we felt."

Her eyes grew wide. "Yes, that's true. He probably thinks we just don't want to leave."

He nodded. "Yes, that's how it would seem to him. And to the servants, it seems like no one was ever stuck in time for two centuries. They would think we've gone mad if we said anything to them about it. What if my father couldn't tell me or my mother what happened because we wouldn't be able to understand his reason for being in the duel?" Recalling the missive he'd received all those years ago, he added, "That duel had something to do with this curse we're in. Remember the pieces of the missive we found in the fireplace?"

"Yes, I remember." She bit her lower lip then said, "Fairies have magic. Even a caged fairy can do something, despite her limitations. I wonder if the fairy can recreate the message."

"You really think that's possible?"

"Fairies can do many things. They're important magical creatures. Leprechauns can grant wishes and hide gold at the end of rainbows, but fairies can do much more."

That would explain his grandfather's obsession with finding a fairy as opposed to a creature like a leprechaun. "Tomorrow we'll go back to the gazebo and see if the fairy will help us restore that missive."

“If she’ll help us, maybe we can use the information to help her somehow.”

His excitement over the possibility dimmed a bit when he considered she might not want to stay if she was able to leave the property. He debated whether he should voice his concerns as they continued up the stairs.

He couldn’t allow the curse to continue just to keep her with him. That would be wrong. She had to have the freedom to leave if that’s what she wanted.

When they reached her bedchamber, he gently stopped her before she went into her room.

“Willow,” he began, his voice soft, “I want you to know that having you here has been the best thing that’s happened to me. It’s not just because it made time move forward for me again. I mean that I’ve enjoyed your company immensely. Even if there wasn’t a barrier keeping us here, being with you would be wonderful.” Hoping to ease some of the awkwardness he was feeling at admitting his feelings, he playfully added, “And I’m not just saying that because you’re the first lady I’ve spent time with in over two centuries.”

As he hoped, she chuckled, and he felt much better. He hadn’t appreciated just how difficult it must have been for Francis to ask Lady Kimberly if he could be her suitor. He recalled telling Francis to just come out and say what he wanted. Now he understood it was much easier to tell someone to go up to a lady and tell her how he felt than to actually do it.

“I like spending time with you, too,” Willow said. “If I had to be stuck with anyone, you’d be my first choice.”

Taking that as a hopeful comment, he asked, “If we figure out a way to break the curse holding us here, would you be willing to stay with me?”

“Yes, I would.”

Her answer came out as almost a whisper, and he caught the tint of pink in her cheeks that told him while she was pleased with the topic, she experienced the same uncertainty about where things were going that he did. That made him feel more at ease, and this sense of ease emboldened him to take the next logical step.

He brought his hand up to her face and took a moment to caress her cheek. Her skin was as soft as it looked. He cupped the side of her face in the palm of his hand then lowered his head so his lips could brush hers. She didn’t back away, nor did she tell him to stop. Encouraged, he kissed her again, and his heartbeat sped up when he felt her respond to him. He brought his hand down to her waist and drew her closer to him. She, in turn, put her arms around his shoulders and deepened the kiss.

Now there was no doubt in his mind. She felt the same way he did. They would make a good match. While they needed to figure out the details of what to do about the curse, at least he was assured they would be together regardless of the outcome.

When the kiss ended, he whispered, “I suppose it’s too soon to ask you to marry me?” Before she could answer, he added, “I thought I should take advantage of the moment since things are going my way.”

“When you know you’re with the person you’re meant to be with, I see no point in waiting.”

“Then if I send for a vicar first thing in the morning, you’ll say yes when he performs the ceremony?”

The flush of shyness returned to her cheeks, but she answered, “I’ll say yes.”

This was going much better than he had hoped. He parted from her and pinched his arm.

“What are you doing?” she asked in surprise.

“Making sure this isn’t a dream.

She laughed. “If it was a dream, I’d tell you.”

“That wouldn’t work if you were part of the dream.”

He could tell his response had taken her by surprise.

“You said you’ll marry me, and since we’re not dreaming, you have to follow through with your word,” he said.

Amused by his joke, she laughed again. “I’m not going to change my mind. There are some things you just know, and I know I want to be with you.”

This time when he brought her into his arms, he didn’t feel quite so awkward. He gave her another kiss. He would have lingered forever at her lips had he not been pestered by a certain part of him that wanted to do more than kiss her. She was a lady. More than that, she was to be his wife. He would do right by her and wait until they wed before going further.

“I look forward to seeing you in the morning,” he whispered.

“I look forward to seeing you, too.”

Daring to risk tempting the male part of him a bit more, he gave her another kiss. But he had to keep it short. He might have noble intentions, but he was only human. He wished her a good night and waited for her to go to her bedchamber before he retired for the night.

Chapter Nineteen

Willow barely got any sleep. She had been exhausted when she and Julian left the library that evening, but finding out he felt the same way she did made her far too excited to sleep. She spent most of the night staring up at the ceiling and thinking of how wonderful it was going to be to wake up each morning with Julian.

They would have breakfast then go outside if it was nice. They would take rides on some days. Perhaps she could talk him into taking walks on others. Sure, it wasn't as comfortable to walk on the dirt road as it was on pavement, especially in the boots ladies wore in this time, but if the road was dry enough, it would be manageable.

After they returned and had something light to eat, they might read in the library. Perhaps she'd give one of those old books a try. It might not be so bad if he would read them to her. She could close her eyes and imagine the book playing out in her mind like a movie. Just hearing his voice would make the old literature more interesting.

Then they would have dinner, and maybe they would stare up at the stars while he held her. It'd been a long time since she'd looked at the stars. When she was a little girl, she used to look at them and pretend her future husband was staring up at them, too. Now she realized such hadn't been the case since Julian used to be stuck with rainy nights.

They'd end the day by making love. Given how much information there had been in her time explaining everything, she knew what to expect. But even so, she had to admit that a tiny part of her was a bit apprehensive since she hadn't been with anyone the way she was going to be with him. She was looking forward to it, though. She thoroughly enjoyed being touched and kissed by him. Her skin still tingled in the most pleasant way from being with him in the hall. She bet it would be much better to go all the way.

She finally managed to drift off to sleep at some point past midnight.

Though her original intention was to sleep in until nine or ten, she was up at dawn. She tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use.

She summoned the maid to bring up a bath. As much as she hated to make the servants carry up those buckets of hot water, she needed to bathe. There might be magic on the property, but none of it removed the need for bathing. Since a shower was out of the question, this was her only option. She could only hope that thanking them was enough to make up for the hassle she was putting them through.

She took more care in getting dressed on this particular day. Knowing Julian wanted to marry her made her want to look her best.

Not that she hadn't been trying to be attractive before, but there was something about being a bride that made a woman want to put a little more effort into her appearance. Fortunately, Julian's mother had left behind some lovely gowns and jewelry. Today she chose a peach gown with jewelry made out of white pearls. It was a bit dressy for breakfast, but it wasn't too out of place from the outfits the lady's maid had helped her pick out on the other mornings.

When she left the room, she thought about knocking on Julian's bedchamber door, but after recalling how late they had stayed up last night, she decided to wait for him downstairs. The butler passed the staircase and offered her a greeting. To her relief, he didn't seem to be as wary of her as he was before. Maybe the servants were starting to accept her.

She originally intended to go to the drawing room because that was where she and Julian had been meeting in the mornings, but it was only seven and she didn't feel like sitting idly by a window for an hour.

She turned on her heel and went to the library. Maybe she would try reading one of the books in the bookcase. Or maybe she would skim through one of the journals Julian's grandfather had left behind.

To her surprise, Julian was already there. The candle was lit, though the sun offered plenty of light. He was reading his grandfather's journal.

For a moment, she recalled the day Mr. Thompson had brought her to this estate. He had emphasized how vintage the whole place was. He'd said it was like stepping back in time, except for the modern conveniences that had been added like bathrooms and electricity. She also recalled looking at Julian's portrait for the first time. Little did she know she was going to actually meet him. And she never would have believed someone so attractive in a portrait would be much more breathtaking in real life. Julian was a perfect fit here. She hoped her coming back here had changed the future for the better. She hoped his title would never go extinct. Someone so kind and noble should be able to preserve his legacy.

He glanced up from the journal and gave her a smile that sent a thrill right through her. "I couldn't sleep. I think I managed four hours last night. I thought I'd come down here and make good use of my time."

"I had trouble sleeping, too," she replied as she shut the door. She didn't think servants made it a habit of eavesdropping, but she preferred her privacy.

"I sent the footman out around six to get the vicar. I thought it best to send for him before you changed your mind about marrying me."

She grinned at the teasing tone in his voice and went over to him.

“I didn’t change my mind. I still want to be your wife.”

“In that case…” He moved back from the desk and patted his lap. “Care to be a bit wicked?”

“Sitting on someone’s lap is wicked in this time?”

His eyes grew wide. “Are you saying that ladies sit on gentlemen’s laps all the time in the future?”

“Actually, it’s fine if a lady does that. No one thinks anything is wrong with it. But then, it’s normal for ladies to wear pants and ride horses like gentlemen do.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Ladies can also wear shorts.”

“What are shorts?”

“They’re like pants that go up to here.” She put her hand at her mid-thigh. “Some go up higher than that, but I never felt comfortable showing that much of my legs.”

“What do you wear on your legs to cover what the shorts don’t?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You mean, you just let the rest of your legs go bare?”

“Yes. We wear shorts on hot days in order to keep cool.”

His eyebrows rose and he scanned her in a way that made her skin warm. “I’m having trouble imagining what shorts are like,” he said. “Would you lift the gown so I can get a better idea of what you’re talking about?”

She gasped and bent forward to cover her legs even though he couldn’t possibly see them through the gown. “No! We’re not married yet.”

“Oh. Then don’t show me your legs. You can just stay in that position.”

It took her a moment to realize she had, unwittingly, given him a generous view of her cleavage when she bent forward. She jerked back up and shook her head at him. “I thought you were a gentleman, what with you being from the 1800s and all. It turns out you’re not all that gentlemanly. You’re…you’re being a…” She struggled to find the word, but it eluded her.

With a smile, he reached out and pulled her onto his lap. “I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘cad’. I have kept myself for my wife, and now that I’ve found her, I see no reason not to indulge in a little scandal.”

“You can indulge after we marry.” Even as she said it, she was tempted to give in, at least a little. She put her arms around his shoulders and settled against him. “It won’t be that long of a wait since you sent for a vicar this morning. Then we can do all sorts of things that are scandalous.”

“What we’re doing right now is already scandalous. If someone

caught us in London, we'd be forced to marry."

"Marry? Just because I'm sitting on your lap?"

"Yes. This is highly inappropriate. It's to your benefit no one in the Ton is here to see this."

"Will the Ton assume I ran off here to have a sordid love affair with you like the servants do?"

"The Ton doesn't know you exist, so no. As long as we're here, there's nothing we have to worry about. The servants have no influence in London. It doesn't matter what they think."

She thought she felt something move up her leg, so she glanced down and saw that he had successfully managed to bring the hem of her gown halfway up to her knees without her realizing it. "I am shocked at you, Julian." She pushed the gown back down. "If you think me sitting on your lap is scandalous, then the fact that you're trying to expose my legs is worse."

"I'm merely curious about shorts."

She chuckled as he made another attempt to lift the hem of her gown. She reached out and grabbed his hand to stop him. "I can't believe you think it's wrong for me to wear jeans when I ride a horse but being groped like this while sitting on your lap is perfectly fine."

"If you wore jeans while riding a horse, you'd be straddling the animal like I do."

"So?"

"Maybe you have to be a gentleman to understand," he began as he put his hand on her thigh. "All I can say is that if you rode a horse like I do, it would be highly suggestive of something you ought to only do when you're alone with me. I can't have others seeing you in that position. They have no right."

"But you have a right to caress my thigh even though we aren't married yet?" she asked as he ran his hand along her leg.

"Oh, you noticed that?"

She was sure a lady in her time would be appalled by all of this, but she found it funny. She nudged him in the shoulder and giggled. "Yes, I noticed it. You're terrible, Julian. I don't know what I'm going to do with you. Really, up until this morning, you didn't do any of this."

"You said you'd marry me. I'm a little excited about what this means for what we can do."

"A *little* excited?"

"I've been pretty much alone for two hundred years. I've had no one to share my life with. I haven't been with a lady before. You can't really blame me for being excited, can you?"

She felt her resolve weaken. She had this image of what proper ladies were like in this time, and she figured not a single one would

allow a gentleman to do more than kiss her. She should aspire to be like them since she was going to stay here. But a part of her felt sorry for him. As he'd said, they would be married by the end of the day. She supposed there really wasn't any harm in showing him the same thing she'd shown other people in her past when she'd worn those shorts.

"All right," she said.

She brought the hem of her gown and the pantalets up to her mid-thigh so he could get a clear view of her legs, though, to be fair, she was wearing stockings, so it wasn't like she was completely bare.

"I'm not going further than this until we're married," she added. "After we're married, you can see everything you want."

"What I'm seeing right now is exquisite," he said, his voice soft as he inspected her legs. He placed his hand near her ankle and slowly brought it up her leg.

Even if they had been in her time when wearing shorts was perfectly acceptable, she suspected the way he was touching her would have still been considered inappropriate. His touch was gentle, but it was also surprisingly arousing. She had no idea this part of her body was so sensitive. No wonder ladies in this time wore long gowns.

He leaned toward her and kissed the side of her neck. She let out a sigh and closed her eyes. This was nice.

Nice? This went beyond nice. This was the most exciting thing she'd ever experienced. And to think he wasn't even touching her in more private places.

She turned her head and brought her mouth to his. He let out a low moan and held her more firmly against him. He traced her bottom lip with his tongue, and when she parted her lips, he slid his tongue into her mouth. Heat swept over her entire body. She could get used to this. She had no idea kissing could be this thrilling. It made all the ones she'd had with past dates pale in comparison.

It seemed strange to think that before she was even born, she was fated to be with him, but that's exactly how it felt. Up until meeting him, she hadn't been complete. With him, she was whole. He was her soulmate, the only man she could ever love. And, she suspected that she was the only lady he could ever love.

She was aware that he had let his hand slide under her pantalets, but at the moment, she wasn't interested in restraints. All she wanted to do was get lost in this moment with him. It was a foretaste of what was to come, and she wanted to get the most out of it.

She lost track of time as they continued kissing. The rest of the world fell away, and all that existed was the two of them. She was aware that he continued exploring her entire leg. She was aware that her fingers wound their way through the soft strands of his hair. She

was aware of how her nipples hardened in anticipation of being touched. She was even aware of the ache between her legs that made her want to do far more than sit on his lap. But she wasn't the least bit aware of the time or the rest of the world around them.

A knock at the door managed to stir her from the dreamlike state she had descended into.

"We'll be in the dining room in a few moments," Julian called out.

She hurried to get off of his lap and smoothed out her gown so that the hem was back at her ankles. "How do you know that was the butler telling us it's time to eat?"

"Because it's eight."

It was? She turned to the fireplace mantle and saw the clock. Had they really been making out for almost an hour?

"He always tells me it's time to eat at eight," Julian said. "It's been that way for two centuries. Even without the same day repeating itself, he likes to be punctual."

She patted her hair to make sure everything was in place, but as she glanced at Julian, who was marking the page he'd been reading in his grandfather's journal, she realized he was the one who needed to comb his hair. He also needed to adjust the cravat. "You can't leave the library like this," she told him. "You're all disheveled." She searched for a mirror, but she couldn't find anything.

He went to the window and checked his reflection. It wasn't as good as a mirror, but she supposed it worked. She hurried over to him and helped him brush his hair with her fingers.

He chuckled. "You don't need to look so scared. They already think we're doing this kind of thing."

"Just because they think it, it doesn't mean they need evidence."

"For someone who lived in an era where ladies sat on gentlemen's laps and wore shorts, you sure do panic a lot."

"When I was in my time, I didn't sit on anyone's lap, and I didn't let someone touch my legs the way you just did."

He stopped fixing his cravat and gave her a questioning look. "But you let someone kiss you the way we were just kissing?"

"No. I kissed a couple of gentlemen, but they were more like the kisses we shared last night. I never made out with someone for almost an hour."

"Good. I rather like the idea that I was your first and only."

He went back to adjusting his cravat.

She stared expectantly at him. When he didn't say more, she asked, "And what about you? How much have you done with another lady?"

"If I had done anything, I wouldn't have been so interested in seeing your legs." He brought her into his arms and gave her a long kiss that threatened to convince her to get right back on his lap.

Thankfully, he released her before the temptation got the best of her. “I’ve been celibate all of my life, and quite frankly, after all these centuries, I don’t have the patience for a long courtship. That’s why we’re getting married today.” He paused. “I just hope there are people beyond the bridge.”

She sensed the uncertainty in his tone and couldn’t blame him for being apprehensive. She wasn’t sure what to expect, either, especially since the coachman had yet to return.

Sounding more optimistic than she felt, she said, “I’m sure everything is normal out there. The fact that time is moving forward for you has to mean we’re lined up with the rest of the world.”

He clasped her hands in his. “Even if it isn’t, I’m glad you’re the one who walked through the time portal in the hallway. I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else.”

She smiled. “I feel the same way.”

“Good. And before I forget to say it, you are so very beautiful.”

Her smile widened at the compliment.

He kissed both of her hands then escorted her out of the room.

Chapter Twenty

After they ate, Julian and Willow went to change into their riding outfits. Julian was the first to get ready, but instead of going to the library, he decided to wait in the hallway near her bedchamber. And, while waiting, he stood at a window. It overlooked the front of the property, so he had a clear view of the bridge.

He had watched the footman leave that morning. The footman had crossed the bridge without any difficulty, and he had taken the carriage down the path lined with the young trees. Julian had watched him until he was no more than a dot on the dirt road.

As far as he could see, the world still existed beyond the property. Even now, he could see the valley and the hills. He could only hope that his eyes weren't deceiving him.

He would know either way before nightfall. If the footman didn't return with the vicar, then he had to assume there wasn't anything beyond this property. That road, the valley, and the hills in the distance were only a mirage.

The coachman he had sent to London hadn't returned yet, but London was a good distance from here. He really had to give the coachman another couple of days to return before he assumed the worst. Travel on horse was faster than travel by carriage, but it still required time and patience. The vicar, however, didn't live that far away. If Julian recalled right, the parish was only half a day from here.

He took a deep breath. If those servants didn't return, then what would it mean for them? Had he unwittingly sent them to some kind of doom? Or would they pass through some portal that would take them to the real world? Was it possible that this place was still in limbo even with Willow here?

He heard footsteps behind him, so he turned and saw Willow heading in his direction with a powder-blue gown with short sleeves in her hands.

"I thought I'd wear this for our wedding," she said. "It's perfect for a bridal gown, except for the color. It's not all white."

Curious, he asked, "What does the color of the gown have to do with anything?"

"White is the color brides wear."

"I've heard of brides wearing other colors."

"Maybe that's what they did in this time, but in my time, and in my country, brides wear white on their wedding day."

"Why?"

She thought for a moment then said, "I don't know. It's just

something they do."

"Do the gentlemen wear white suits?"

"No. They can wear any color they want."

"The way people do things in your time makes little sense to me," he admitted. "Sometimes you wear breeches like a gentleman, and at other times you wear shorts that barely cover anything. Sitting on someone's lap isn't scandalous. You defy a lot of rules meant for polite society, and yet you're worried about wearing a white gown on your wedding day?"

She gave him a pointed look. "You're not exactly pure in all you do, Julian. You were the one who urged me onto your lap and asked to see my legs."

"That's different."

"How so?"

"Because we are to be married before the day is over. As it is, we're practically husband and wife already. Besides, you didn't seem all that opposed to it when we were in the library."

She glanced around as if she was afraid one of the servants had overheard him.

"I'm discreet," he assured her. "Your lady's maid left as you were telling me what people wear on their wedding day. For all she knows, we're having a senseless argument."

"We're not arguing. We were just talking about how things are different in this time and the one I came from."

He had suspected that slipping in the word *argument* might take her mind off of his behavior in the library, and he was relieved the trick had worked. The truth was he had been a cad when he encouraged her to do things they really shouldn't be doing before they married.

"I can't even imagine what you'd think if you were to step into my time," Willow said. "On hot summer days, men go outside without their shirts on, and they often wear shorts, too. I mean, from your perspective, everyone would probably look like they were in their undergarments."

"You've seen gentlemen without their shirts on, and you've seen their bare legs?" he asked in shock.

"Yes, but no one thinks anything of it because we're used to it."

"But-but they do this out in the open? Right where anyone can see them?"

"Well, yes, but it's perfectly acceptable and everyone does it. There's nothing going on that would be wrong. Those gentlemen are usually mowing a lawn or swimming in a pool." She paused, her eyes wide. "Oh dear. I don't think I should explain what people wear at swimming pools and beaches."

He didn't like any of this. "People in the future have no sense of modesty. It's to your benefit that you're here with me. A lady doesn't need to be ambushed by such nakedness. Your sensibilities are important. They ought to be protected."

"They will be protected since I'm here with you. I'd much rather be with you than back there anyway. I don't miss my past. You're my present and my future. That's all that matters to me." She kissed his cheek. "Are you upset with me?"

Though he didn't like the idea of her having seen gentlemen in a state of undress, she couldn't be blamed for it. Not if all of society was doing this in her time. He was just glad she'd no longer be subjected to such indecency.

He slipped his arm around her waist and drew her closer to him. "I'm not upset with you. How could I be upset when this is what your world was like?"

"Thankfully, you won't be asked to go to my time. I'm very happy here with you. I have no desire to go back to that world. This is the one I want to be in."

He was relieved to hear that. If he had to go to her time in order to be with her, he would, but the very idea of being in that time made him uneasy. There were many things she'd mentioned that he didn't understand, and he would rather not see a lot of people prancing about in so little clothing. Yes, he was very much relieved that she was happy to stay in this time.

"Even if I was surrounded by all the ladies in London, I would want no other but you," he said. "You are the only one for me."

"I want no one else, either. I'm glad that time portal brought us together."

"I am, too. We have much to be thankful for." He kissed her. "So you chose that gown because it's the closest you could get to a white one?"

"That was part of it, but I also fell in love with it. This is the most beautiful gown I've ever seen. I thought something like this would be appropriate for a ball or some elaborate occasion. It doesn't seem like something you wear just to eat or read a book. Something important must be done when wearing it."

"I can think of few things as important as marriage."

"I agree. I know this gown belonged to your mother, but it almost seems like it was made for me." She laughed. "I know how silly that sounds."

"It might not be all that silly. I can't recall ever seeing my mother in it."

"Really? She never wore something this elegant?"

He shrugged. "If she did, I was too young to remember. Did the

maid already adjust it so it'll be ready for this evening?"

"Yes. All of the clothes have been mended to fit me. She's now working on my slippers. I'll return this to my bedchamber. I'll be right back." She gave him a quick kiss then went to her room.

He smiled as he watched her. After a moment, he turned his attention back to the window. He didn't want doubts to cloud this day, but he sure did hope the footman would be here later this day with the vicar so he could be assured the world as he knew it still existed.

Willow and Julian arrived at the gazebo an hour later. He pulled out the pieces of parchment from his pocket and showed them to her. "All three pieces are here. I don't know if they're enough, but we might as well see what happens."

Willow nodded and accepted his hand before he led her up the steps of the gazebo. Again, the sensation of electricity passed through her, and the red and gold colors swirled around them. The cage was still on the wooden bench, and the fairy was still in the center of it.

The fairy turned her gaze to them.

Willow and Julian knelt in front of the cage.

"I was stuck in the same day for two centuries," Julian said. "The day before I was trapped in time, I received a missive. Unfortunately, I didn't save it. I put it in the fire. All that's left are these pieces of the parchment." He showed her the pieces that were in the palm of his hand. "I was wondering if you can use these fragments to put the missive back together. Willow and I think there might be something in it that can help us break the curse we're all under."

The fairy's gaze went to the contents in his hand. She closed her eyes and said a few words that Willow couldn't understand. Green mist began to form around her for several long moments. It grew brighter and brighter until it was so bright that Willow had to squint to keep looking at it. In the next moment, the light struck the pieces of paper.

A jolt went through Willow, causing her to jerk back. Julian jerked back, too. Thankfully, they managed to keep holding hands, or else the fairy's magic might have been rendered ineffective.

A green glow lifted the three pieces into the air.

Willow watched in amazement as more parchment began to form around the pieces. As the parchment spread out into a complete missive, words formed on it. Once the process was complete, the missive fell softly into the palm of Julian's hand and rolled up on its own right before a seal appeared on it. The green glow surrounding it

disappeared.

Willow's gaze went to the fairy, and the fairy looked at them expectantly.

Julian cleared his throat and turned his attention to the seal. "I don't recognize who this is from. A seal designates the sender," he told Willow and the fairy.

"You said you didn't know who sent it when you first received it," Willow reminded him.

"That's correct. I didn't." He studied it. "There's only an *R* overlapping a *V* on it. That doesn't give me much to go by."

"Well, let's read what it says."

"I need both hands for this."

With a nod, Willow let go of his hand. The colors and fairy disappeared. He hurried to break the seal and unrolled the missive.

Unsure of whether the fairy could see or hear them when they couldn't see her, Willow touched his arm. At once, the colors and fairy returned.

"It's addressed to me," Julian said. "That part I do remember." He cleared his throat. "This is what it says. 'A year before you were born, your father killed your uncle in a duel. That uncle was his older brother, and that brother was about to marry me. I conceived a son before your uncle died, but because of your father, the child could not be the heir. Instead, you are. Know this, Julian Azazel: your uncle's death doesn't mean you're safe. I will be coming for you. When the clock chimes midnight, you will be bound to the same day until the requirements of my curse are satisfied. Then, and only then, will time move forward for you again.'"

Willow waited for Julian to continue so that they would all understand why she was going to come for him, but he only put the missive down and said, "That's all there is."

"There's not much to learn from it," Willow said in disappointment.

"No, there isn't, but it explains a bit about why my mother said the duel was foolish. My father killed his own brother," Julian whispered.

"Do you think your father killed him to get the title?"

"My father didn't seem like that kind of person. He once said the title was a hard responsibility to bear."

Willow had to admit that didn't sound like someone who would murder his brother in order to be the earl of this estate. She turned her gaze to the fairy. "Do you know what happened to the child?"

The fairy nodded and gave a gesture that indicated the child was dead.

"It wouldn't have mattered if the child lived or not," Julian said. "She never married my uncle. That means the child was a bastard.

He'd have no right to the title even if he had lived."

In that case, she supposed the fate of the child didn't matter, though it was sad the child died. She forced her attention back to the missive. "Who wrote it? Did she leave her name?"

Julian squinted. "There's not a name. It's a drawing. And if I'm interpreting it right, it looks like a flower."

"A flower?"

He showed it to her. "It has to be a flower."

Willow studied it. Depending on how she looked at it, it could be one or two flowers. "Wait a minute. I've seen this before." She took the letter from him and struggled to bring up the memory she was reaching for. After a minute, she recalled a tattoo of a rose and a violet. She gasped. "I saw this on Violet. It was above her wrist. She said it went with her name." And if there were two flowers and one looked like a violet, then it was possible that she also went by the name of another familiar flower—one that was pink. "Is the name Rose familiar to you?" she asked Julian.

The fairy let out a high-pitch wail that was so sharp that it made Willow put her hands over her ears. Julian did the same, and the broken seal and letter fell to the floor of the gazebo. At once, that horrifying sound and the colors of magic vanished.

Willow waited until her heart wasn't beating so fast before she lowered her hands. "I think it's safe to say the fairy knows who Rose is."

Julian lowered his hands and nodded. "I would say so. My heart feels like it's going to leap right out of my chest."

"Mine, too." She took a deep breath and put her hands on her knees. She wasn't ready to touch him yet. As soon as she did, that fairy would return, and who knew if she would still be screaming?

Julian seemed to be in no hurry for the awful sound to return, either, since he didn't make a move to touch her. He waited until he was no longer out of breath before saying, "The only name that's familiar to me is Violet, and that's only because you mentioned her."

"Your mother and father never mentioned anyone named Rose?"

"No. They rarely ever discussed the past. It was like they wanted to forget it." He paused as he picked up the parchment and pieces of the seal. "Maybe it was too painful for them to remember what happened. I know my father was aloof. He seemed as if he had withdrawn into himself. He tried to be a part of things. He made the effort to engage with me and my mother, but it always seemed like there was something tormenting him."

"I think killing one's brother would do that to anyone."

"After everything I learned from my grandfather's journals and those books, I think it was more than the duel that haunted him. He

probably knew why my grandfather kept looking for a fairy. It's a shame he never said anything to me about it. I feel like we're at a disadvantage. This person named Violet or Rose knows about us, but we know so little about her."

"At least your father saved the journals and books. That's better than nothing."

He looked down at the missive and reread it. "I wish I could make more sense out of this. Maybe she feels like she deserved to be the countess of the estate since she was going to marry my uncle."

"But what good would that do? Aren't gentlemen the only ones who benefit from a title?" Up to now, that was the impression she'd gotten.

"Well, yes, they get more from a title, but a lady who marries a titled gentleman benefits socially. She also gets to be the mother of an heir if she has a son. If the titled gentleman is wealthy, she gets access to his money."

"That's not much different from marriage to any rich man, except for being able to say you're a countess, I guess." Willow glanced at the spot where she knew the fairy to be. "I want to make sure Violet and Rose are one and the same. Are you ready to touch again?"

He rolled up the missive and slipped it and the broken seal into his pocket. Then he held his hand out to her. "I'm ready."

After bracing herself for what would happen next, Willow took Julian's hand. Thankfully, the fairy had stopped screaming. Willow tentatively turned her gaze to the fairy, who was watching them from the cage. Though she was quiet, Willow caught the look of anger on the fairy's face.

No. The fairy wasn't angry. She was furious. She *hated* the lady who had written that missive.

"Please don't be upset with the next question," Willow said. "But we need to make sure we're dealing with the same person. Is Violet also Rose?"

The fairy nodded and then closed her eyes. Green light sparked from the cage, and the fairy's expression grew tense, as if she was concentrating on something. The cage rattled. Willow moved closer to Julian, and he drew her into his arms. She clung to him and got ready for whatever was going to happen next.

The green light sparked faster and faster around the cage until it shot out from the cage and struck Willow with such force that she and Julian flew across the gazebo. They came to an abrupt stop just before landing into one of the benches.

All at once, Willow felt the fairy's despair and longing to return to Ireland where she could be with her clan. The *Faerie Ó Loinsigh Sept*, as the fairy thought of it. In Willow's mind, she saw a twenty-year-old

version of Violet. Violet had been pretty in her forties, but she had been much more so at twenty. Willow suspected that many gentlemen had fallen in love with her beauty.

In the fairy's memory, Willow saw Violet holding a pot filled with gold coins. The leprechaun standing next to Violet caught the green fairy and forced her into the iron cage. Violet gave the leprechaun the pot of gold. He, in turn, gave her the caged fairy and then handed Violet the fairy's wand.

The memory faded, and Willow and Julian collapsed against each other. The fairy also collapsed, but unlike Willow and Julian, the fairy fell into unconsciousness. At first, Willow thought the poor fairy was dead, but, thankfully, the fairy was still breathing.

"Did you see the memory the fairy gave me?" Willow asked Julian, still shaken up by what had just happened.

"Did it involve a leprechaun and some gold?" Julian's voice was so soft she barely heard it.

"Yes." So he had seen it. It must have been the fact that they were holding each other that had allowed the memory to go to both of them.

"Leprechauns like gold," Willow said as she thought over the way the poor fairy had been trapped. "Gold has been known to attract them. Violet must have known this and used it to make a deal with the leprechaun. In exchange for gold, he gave her that fairy. The fairy must be doing her bidding."

"Yes, but she's doing it under compulsion. She doesn't want to be here."

"The animals in the barn didn't want to do her bidding, either."

"I might not know the details of the duel, but I'm beginning to think my father had a good reason for stopping my uncle from marrying this lady who goes by two names." He stood up then helped Willow to her feet. "I wonder if he knew about this fairy."

"It's possible Violet didn't bring the fairy here until later. She found a way to give you the missive. Obviously, she was here after your uncle's death."

He grimaced but didn't argue with her.

They glanced at the fairy, who was still unconscious.

"I hope we didn't hurt her," Julian said.

Willow thought over what she had read. "Fairies live a very long time. There doesn't seem to be any set number of years they live, but it's not uncommon for a fairy to live anywhere from 1000 to 1500 years. They don't get sick like you and I do. I think communicating with us while in that cage wore her out. The iron has weakened her, but she'll recover without any harm. We should give her a break. I doubt she knows much more than what she's shared with us." And

Willow had seen the poor creature suffer enough for one day.

He put his arm around her shoulders, and they left the gazebo together in silence.

Chapter Twenty-One

To Julian's relief, the vicar and footman arrived thirty minutes before dinner. All of his fears about the world not existing beyond the property had been for nothing. It was still there. And that meant the coachman had reached London and given Francis his missive. Julian hadn't unknowingly doomed the footman or coachman to obscurity by making them leave this place. Now the feeling of dread that had been plaguing him could finally be put to rest.

Once he saw to it that the vicar's room was ready for his stay for the night, Julian, Willow, and the vicar went to the dining room.

"It seems like I was just here," the vicar said after they sat at the table. He glanced at Willow. "I presided over his father's funeral."

In Julian's mind, that funeral had happened so long ago that he hadn't considered how short ago it must seem to the vicar. Julian hadn't mentioned Willow to him at the funeral, and suddenly, he was asking the vicar to preside over their marriage.

Julian set down his glass of wine and directed his attention to the old gentleman. "Willow was unable to come here for the funeral. She came here shortly before I asked the footman to get you."

Julian was sure the vicar wondered why there was no chaperone to see to Willow's virtue, but he probably chose to let the matter go since he said, "It's common for couples to marry in the morning, but I'll be happy to preside over the wedding after dinner."

"I have a specific gown I'd like to wear for the ceremony," Willow told the vicar. "It shouldn't take me long to get ready."

The vicar smiled at her. "I don't mind waiting while a bride gets ready for her wedding. It's a special occasion, and it only happens once in a lifetime. A lady has the right to take as long as she wants for something this important." He winked at Julian. "She's already beautiful. We won't be waiting long."

"No, we won't," Julian agreed before smiling at Willow who blushed.

The butler set out the soup, and they began to eat.

"I'm glad to be here for a happy occasion," the vicar said. "Funerals are always terrible. I've been a vicar for forty-six years, and they don't get any easier. Yes, you know the person is in a better place, but there are the people they leave behind. That's who you feel sorry for. There's nothing you can do to ease their pain. I think your bride will bring you comfort."

Julian wasn't sure how to respond to that. He'd had two centuries to get over the death of his father, and a little more time than that to get over the death of his mother.

“I married your parents in this manor,” the vicar continued.

Julian dipped his spoon into the soup and asked, “How was their wedding?”

“It was lovely,” the vicar replied. “Your grandfather missed it. He wanted to be here, but something important drew him to another country. I believe it was Ireland. He seemed to go there a lot.”

“Yes, he did,” Julian said. “My grandfather even kept books about Irish myths and legends.”

The vicar chuckled. “I forgot about those. Your grandmother used to get exasperated with all of his reading. ‘All he does is run off to his library to read,’ she’d tell me when I saw her.” He chuckled. “I still remember the way she rolled her eyes and shook her head. I would tell her it’s good for a gentleman to have a hobby. If gentlemen don’t do something useful with their time, they grow restless. Idleness is the devil’s playground.” He stopped talking and glanced at Willow. “Pardon me, my dear. I didn’t mean to exclude you from the conversation. Where did you come from?”

Julian’s eyes grew wide, and he noted the flicker of panic on Willow’s face. “She came from London,” Julian said for her. “That’s where we met. We were at a ball. I asked her to dance, and things just progressed from there.” Knowing he had to explain why she was here, he hurried to add, “We were betrothed. We were about to read the banns when I got word about my father’s death.” He paused. How could he word things in a way that would be the least suspicious to the vicar? “I asked her to come out here to marry me when I realized I had a lot to tend to here at this estate.”

The vicar looked at Willow, and she offered him a smile that indicated she hoped the vicar would believe the story.

Julian didn’t know what else they could say. The more he said, the more he might complicate things. The vicar would never believe the truth. Curses, portals between times, and fairies. It was beyond the realm of believability. He’d rather have the vicar think that he and Willow were in a rush to marry because she was expecting a child than go into what had really brought them together. He was sure the vicar was thinking she was with child despite the fact that he was too polite to come out and say it. At least this way, the vicar wouldn’t be tempted to haul him and Willow off to an asylum.

Hoping to turn the conversation in another direction, Julian asked the vicar, “Has anything new happened since you were here?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” the vicar replied. “You remember the situation I told you about regarding Lady Whitfield?”

No, he didn’t, but that conversation had occurred so long ago. “How is she doing?” he decided to ask.

“Much better, thank goodness. It turned out the rash was nothing

to worry about."

The vicar went on to talk about her, and from there, Julian managed to keep him talking about other people he hadn't given any thought to for a very long time. It was to his benefit the vicar happened to be longwinded in his answers.

From time to time, Julian noticed the way Willow's eyes drooped, but she managed to stay awake. Julian felt the exhaustion catching up to him as well. They had gotten little sleep since she stepped into this time. Not that he minded. When he was awake, he had the pleasure of knowing she was still here. Twice since her arrival, he'd had nightmares where he was, once more, all alone in this place.

Those few first moments after he woke up filled him with such terror that he could hardly breathe. When he realized he was in a new day, the relief he experienced was so strong that his strength departed him for a good five minutes. He didn't know what he would do if he lost her.

Just thinking of it gave him a chill. He forced those nightmares from his mind. The exhaustion departed from him, and he was, once more, glad to be awake. If it was up to him, he'd never sleep again.

He looked in Willow's direction, just to make sure she was still here. As if sensing that he was watching her, her gaze went to him. He smiled at her, and she offered a smile in return. The wedding would unite them together for the rest of their lives. He couldn't wait.

He turned his attention back to what the vicar was saying and hurried to finish his meal.

Willow woke from her slumber to someone leaving butterfly kisses from her shoulder down to her arm. She was lying on her side, and her back was to Julian. She didn't recall drifting off to sleep after she and Julian consummated the marriage. The last thing she recalled was resting with her head on his shoulder as he brushed his hand up and down her back in gentle motions.

"You were a beautiful bride," Julian whispered in her ear.

"How do you know I'm not still asleep?" she whispered in return.

He chuckled. "I don't." He kissed the side of her neck and caressed her thigh. "Your legs are much better without stockings on them."

She opened her eyes and rolled onto her other side so that she was facing him. She thought to ask him how he liked the rest of her, but he brought his mouth to hers and the question fled far from her mind.

She groaned and wrapped her leg around his waist so that she could roll on top of him. His erection pressed against her sensitive nub, but she resisted the urge to rub against him. Instead, she gave

into the thrill of exploring his mouth intimately with her tongue.

One would think after making love to him the first time, her desire for him would have been somewhat sated, but it turned out the opposite was true. She wanted to be consumed by him. He must have felt the same way since his hands roamed along her body in a way that excited her all the more.

The patience she'd had their first time was long gone. She simply didn't have what it took to wait for him to advance their lovemaking. And honestly, she didn't think he would mind it if she took a more leading role this time.

She kissed his jaw and then his neck and decided to proceed further down. He had done most of the exploring the first time. This time, she wanted to learn him more intimately. She kissed his nipples and traced them with her tongue, and judging by the moan that escaped his lips, he liked what she was doing.

Feeling a bit wicked, she lifted her head and said, "If you like that, you're really going to enjoy what comes next."

Before he could ask what she was going to do, she left a trail of kisses down his chest and then down his abdomen. She brought her hand to his penis and let her fingers trace it. He murmured that he wanted her to continue, and a part of her felt triumphant about her ability to excite him.

She spent time learning him. This part of him fascinated her. It had felt wonderful inside her, touching places deep within her that made her aware of how sensitive her core was. She wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft and gently brought it to his tip. She noted the bead of moisture at the slit and bent down to taste it.

He moaned and wiggled beneath her. "That feels heavenly," he whispered.

Encouraged, she brought her tongue back to his tip and traced it. After a few seconds, she took more of him into her mouth and sucked lightly while using her hand to squeeze the base of his shaft. A part of her had to fight back the shyness that rose up within her. She wanted to do this. She wanted to bring him pleasure during their foreplay as much as she wanted to explore him. And there was no doubt he was enjoying this. The fact that he was vocal in expressing just how much he wanted her to keep doing this gave her more courage, and her actions eventually grew bolder.

She had no way of knowing how long she spent studying him, but he wasn't the only one who found this whole thing arousing. Her core ached with the need to take him into her. She wanted him inside her. *Needed* him inside her.

She moved back on top of him and took him into her. She let out a groan as he filled her. She leaned over so she could grasp his

shoulders and then began rocking her hips.

He cupped her breasts in his hands, an action that only served to bring her closer to the peak. Before today, she'd had no idea of just how sexual she was, and giving into that part of her personality emboldened her to take the pleasure this act offered her. Her actions grew faster and urgent. And then, finally, just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, pleasure erupted deep inside her.

She cried out and grew still. She couldn't move. All she could do was take in the waves of pleasure as they crashed into her. It was so intense she could hardly bear it. After several long moments, her body relaxed, and she could, once more, focus on the world around her.

She lowered her head to kiss him. He put his arms around her waist and rolled her onto her back. Still weak, all she could do was let him complete what they had started. His actions were determined and focused, and her core responded by taking him deeper into her. She let out a contented sigh as he pursued his climax. And when it came, she held him tightly to her as he filled her with his seed. Spent, he collapsed in her arms. She kissed his cheek and then pressed her cheek against his. She'd never felt more complete in her entire life.

"I love you, Willow," Julian whispered.

"I love you, too," she softly said.

He gave her a lingering kiss then settled beside her in the bed. She snuggled against him, and he wrapped the gold-colored blanket around them.

"If it was up to me, I'd never sleep again," he whispered.

"Everyone needs to sleep. You can't stay awake forever." She took his hand in hers. "When you wake up, I'll be here with you."

He squeezed her hand and set it over his heart. They fell into a comfortable silence, and before long, she fell asleep.

After breakfast, Willow sipped cider in the drawing room as Julian saw the vicar to the carriage. She had sat in this room quite a bit before she'd crossed over into this time. She recalled reading her book and glancing up at Julian's portrait once in a while.

Now, as her gaze went to the portrait, she didn't know if it should alarm her that the portrait was one of the few things she remembered with exact precision from her time. She could barely remember the contents of the book she'd been reading. She also had trouble remembering if it'd been raining that day. She thought that it might have been. She was sure the rain had prompted her to spend the day inside instead of taking a walk. But she couldn't be sure. And considering it really hadn't been that long ago, she thought the

memory should be an easy one to dig up from the recesses of her mind.

But whether or not it'd been raining that day wasn't the only thing that seemed to be slipping from focus. Other aspects of her past seemed to be slipping from her, too. Her childhood, her parents, her friends, her schooling, her work… All of it was still there in her mind, but they were beginning to seem more like people and events she'd read about in a book or perhaps dreamed about.

It was such a strange thing that seemed to be happening to her. It was as if the magic that had brought her here was slowly removing all attachments she had to her past. Only the things in connection with this time period felt real.

Her gaze went to the desk. She'd sat in the chair behind it that day Mr. Thompson had given her the papers she'd been unable to sign. That, she did remember. She remembered Violet and the three men. She recalled the white streak in the black hair of the one who was now a horse. She recalled the bright green eyes of the one who was now a cat. She recalled the short, rounded-faced one with a smushed nose who was now a barn owl.

She looked at the portrait. She also remembered feeling guilty for her willingness to sign those papers. She'd felt as if she was betraying the person in that portrait who must have intended for the estate to stay in the family line forever.

Thank goodness she hadn't been able to sign them. If Greg or any of the others before her had known Julian, there was no way they could have been willing to sell the estate.

She took another sip of the cider then put the cup down. She went to the nearest window and saw Julian and the vicar. They were talking as the footman patiently waited at the carriage. Her gaze went to the sky. The clouds threatened rain. It was good the vicar was leaving now. She had no idea how long it would take him to get home, but she suspected it would be raining by the time the footman returned.

Her attention went back to Julian, and a warmth swept over her. She'd been attracted to him from the moment she'd seen the portrait. She remembered thinking it was a shame he wasn't still alive because he was attractive.

She'd much rather feel the warmth of his touch and the softness of his lips on her skin than look at his portrait in a future time. Her thoughts went to the previous night and the dawn when he'd made love to her again. She used to think love was something soft and gentle. She hadn't known it could come with a sweeping passion that threatened to consume her. She could have credited it to magic, just as magic was wiping out her past, but, deep down, she knew there

was no other reason for the passion she experienced than Julian himself.

Their pasts might have been separate, but their futures were entwined. There would never be anyone else. Her heart was his forevermore, and she knew his heart would always belong to her.

She touched the window as if she might be able to feel him through the pane of glass. She couldn't, of course. It was fanciful thinking. But he glanced over at her as if he was aware of her longing to be with him. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw a flash of red and gold colors swirl between them. She blinked, and the image was gone.

The vicar said something, and Julian's attention was drawn back to him.

She blinked again, as if coming out of a daze. She lowered her hand and stepped away from the window. She had to have imagined that flash of colors. Nothing like that was possible unless they were in the gazebo or at the bridge.

But there was probably magic all over this property. It wasn't just confined to the gazebo. It surrounded the entire place. That was why she and Julian couldn't leave. Magic had been in the time portal that had allowed her to come here. Magic was why she hadn't been able to sign the contract selling the estate. Magic was in the three animals that remembered her from the future. Who was to say that there wasn't magic flowing between her and Julian?

But why hadn't that red and gold thread appeared before? She and Julian had looked at each other plenty of times without her seeing anything between them. And this time they hadn't even been touching. At the bridge, they had to touch the invisible barrier at the same time to see red and gold, and at the gazebo, they had to touch each other in order to see the colors. Why was it different now?

You're married now. Marriage is a union where two become one.

Her eyebrows furrowed. Could that be possible? Could something as simple as marriage cause the magic to work in a new way?

In a place where magic was all across the place, anything was possible. She had to suspend the rules of the "normal" world. Those rules didn't apply here.

She returned to the settee and turned her gaze back to the portrait. She stared at it with the same longing she'd just experienced while looking at Julian. She spent a couple of minutes trying to get some form of magic to present itself, but nothing happened.

Then she heard Julian's voice from the entryway, and a sliver of red and gold flashed from her to the doorway of the room. She blinked in surprise, and the colors vanished.

The footsteps grew louder, and her heartbeat picked up in

anticipation. She stood up from the settee and turned toward the doorway. Another sliver of red and gold shimmered in the air. Julian came into the room. In her excitement, she forgot about it and ran over to him.

He chuckled as he brought her into his arms. “It’s nice to know you missed me while I was gone.”

“I did,” she whispered. “I missed you terribly.” She cupped the back of his neck and urged him to bring his mouth to hers.

He wrapped her more firmly in his embrace and deepened the kiss.

She let out a contented sigh and gave into the thrill of being with him. It was such a heady experience. A lady could get used to this kind of thing.

When the kiss ended, he whispered, “If you keep this up, I might never give you a moment alone.”

“What if I don’t want to be alone?” She kissed his neck.

He groaned. “I won’t be but a moment.”

He released her, and it was on the tip of her tongue to protest until she realized he went to shut the door. This time she saw the red and gold colors shimmering between them more clearly. The thread continued to glow between them as Julian pulled the drapes shut in order to give them their privacy.

Her skin tingled, eager for him to kiss and touch her again. He returned to her arms, and she forgot all about the red and gold colors as he made love to her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

That evening, rain pelted down on the windows of Julian's bedchamber, but he barely heard it as he reread the missive.

A year before you were born, your father killed your uncle in a duel. That uncle was his older brother, and that brother was about to marry me. I conceived a son before your uncle died, but because of your father, the child could not be the heir. Instead, you are. Know this, Julian Azazel: your uncle's death doesn't mean you're safe. I will be coming for you. When the clock chimes midnight, you will be bound to the same day until the requirements of my curse are satisfied. Then, and only then, will time move forward for you again.

He set it on the dresser next to the candelabra. The missive implied the lady who'd written it intended to come here, and she was specifically coming for him. What did his uncle's death or the fact that her child hadn't been the heir have to do with him? What did this have to do with Willow? Why set up an object to allow Willow to pass into this time? Why did she need to keep a fairy prisoner here? This lady who went by the names Rose and Violet obviously had evil intentions.

He needed to get back to his grandfather's journals. His future was tied to Willow's now. If the writer of the missive meant him harm, she might very well harm Willow simply because she was his wife.

He couldn't let that happen. He'd rather go through eternity alone than see any harm come to her. It was no wonder Francis had been so happy when Lady Kimberly accepted his proposal. Now that Julian knew what it was like to be enraptured by a lady's love, he would never be the same.

Julian glanced at the doorway separating his bedchamber from Willow's. She had left the door open when she went to take her bath. His gaze went to one of the windows. It was late. The sun had already set for the evening. After all the days that had passed on in agonizing slowness, each day since Willow's arrival seemed to go much too fast.

He went to Willow's bedchamber and was surprised to see that she was still in the tub. Her legs were pulled up to her chest, and her head was resting on her knees.

"Isn't the water cold?" he asked as he approached her.

She looked up at him, and his gaze inadvertently went to her breasts. His body responded to her on its own accord. One would think making love to her last night and twice today would have diminished some of the need he had to be with her, but if anything, it seemed to have only heightened his desire for her. Maybe this was what happened when a gentleman discovered the pleasures of the

flesh. Or perhaps it was the fact that he'd been alone for two centuries. He had been deprived of any meaningful companionship for such a long time. Willow was the perfect companion. She completed him in every way. What gentleman could resist making love to someone as lovely as her?

He leaned forward and touched her arm. "You're chilly." He retrieved her towel and urged her to stand up so he could wrap it around her.

"I'm forgetting things," she said as he helped her out of the tub. "Like the tub. It seems like in my time, tubs were bigger than this, and there weren't buckets of hot water that went into them. They were filled another way. And I'm sure there was a specific room where a tub is supposed to be. I think this room had something other than a chamber pot in it, too."

It took him a moment to recall the thing she had mentioned the day she had come into his time. "I think it was a toilet."

"Toilet! Yes, that's it." She frowned. "I don't remember how it worked. I'm forgetting a lot of things about the inventions that were in my time."

"Things like the moving stairs?" he asked.

"Moving stairs." She looked up at the ceiling as if the answer was going to be there.

Though he knew it wouldn't be, he glanced up.

"I remember telling you about moving stairs. I remember that I came to England on something that could fly in the air. I know I didn't come by ship. Then when I was here, I came in something that wasn't a horse, but the details of how the thing worked is slipping from my mind." She frowned. "I think the magic is erasing my memories from my time. The only things I seem to remember are things that are attached to this time."

"Do you feel all right?" He touched her forehead. She didn't feel hot, so she didn't have a fever.

"I feel like I'm waking up from a dream. I think it's the transition from coming into this time."

"Has it been happening all the time that you've been here?"

"No. I just noticed it this morning. It's been getting stronger through the day."

"Maybe I should summon a doctor."

"I'm not sick." She pulled the towel closer around herself. "I feel wonderful."

"How can you say that when you're forgetting things?"

"Because I don't think there's anything wrong. I think this is the magic doing its work. Our marriage has changed something."

"Your coming into this time has changed something. I don't see

how our marriage affects anything."

"When we married, it changed everything. Our lives are now permanently joined together. There's no undoing it."

He cupped her face in his hands. "Willow, I would never do anything to hurt you."

"I know you wouldn't. I love you, Julian. I want to be here with you. I want to be your wife. I don't think the changes are bad. I think they're necessary. I don't know how the timeline works, but things have adjusted."

"I know that. It's why Francis won't come here and find that I've disappeared along with the servants. He'll be able to marry Lady Kimberly. He might go on to have children."

"Yes, and we might, too. Think of it. We have changed things. I don't know if it's for better or worse, but things are going to be different in the future. The inventions will stay the same, and historical events will happen as they're supposed to. But our future has been changed. We might not always be under a curse. This magic might not always be here." She paused. "If we are able to leave this property, it would probably disturb something in the timeline if I were to inadvertently mention an invention that hasn't been created yet. I think I have to forget some things in order to keep things the way they're meant to be."

"I suppose that makes sense," he slowly said. "But you feel fine? You're not sick or in pain or anything?"

She smiled. "No, I'm not sick, and I'm not in pain. I just feel like a part of me is in a dreamlike state."

He still didn't understand why none of this happened before they married, but there were many things he didn't understand. He caressed her cheek. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"You're not going to lose me. We're just becoming one. I think the longer we're together, the stronger our bond will get. I forgot to mention it, but this morning, I noticed a thread that connects us."

His eyebrows furrowed. "A thread?"

"You know how the red and gold colors swirl at the bridge and in the gazebo?"

Not sure where she was going with this, he offered a hesitant nod.

"I saw the colors between us when you were talking to the vicar, and I saw it again when you came into the drawing room." Her eyes lit up in excitement. "Our marriage has made whatever magic we have stronger."

"You think we have magic? In us?"

"I do. It's why we could only see the fairy when we touched. But that was before. I wonder if we have to touch now that we're married."

He shook his head. He had seen no such thread passing between them, but, if he recalled correctly, he had felt drawn toward her, as if she was pulling him to her. At the time, he had assumed it had been his eagerness to return to her that made him feel that way. Now, however, he wondered if the pull had been motivated by something deeper than desire.

"I just want you to be all right," he whispered.

"I am all right." She sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything. All I've done is worried you."

"I'm glad you did say something. I want to know if something is happening to you."

"It's not bad. I just feel different, like I no longer belong in the future."

He studied her. Perhaps, it was as she said. The magic that had brought her here was probably erasing things from her mind that didn't exist in this time. It made sense. How could she truly belong here if there was the part of her that held on to the future?

Feeling better, he relaxed. Just so long as nothing but those memories were erased from her mind, there was no need to panic.

"It's nice that you care so much about me," she whispered.

He lowered his head so he could kiss her.

The kiss started out brief and gentle, but his body prompted him to keep going. And that was fine with him. He hadn't come into this bedchamber with the intention of letting her go right to sleep.

He removed her towel and let it fall to the floor. She wrapped her arms around his neck and parted her lips so that he could explore her mouth. His hands slid up her bare back so he could draw her closer to him. He spent considerable time kissing her. He had been more than a little excited to consummate their marriage last night. It'd gone much faster than he would have preferred, but he had sufficient patience now to take his time savoring this time that he had with her.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. He set her on the red covers and took a moment to examine her body. He'd seen art in museums, sunrises and sunsets, and other beautiful things, but she was, by far, the most exquisite thing he'd ever beheld with his eyes. Her damp hair was spread out on the pillow under her head. Her skin, however, was dry, and his gaze traced the length of it. Yes, she was the finest work of art he'd ever seen.

He removed his clothes then settled next to her. He cupped the side of her face and brought his lips to hers again. She invited him into her mouth, and he accepted the invitation. Tonight, he wouldn't be in such a rush. He was going to draw this out for as long as both of them could bear it.

He let his hand drift down her neck and to one of her breasts. His

fingers brushed her nipple, and it hardened in response. He traced the edge of it before letting his thumb caress the center of it. She let out a soft moan. Since she liked that, he brought his hand to her other breast and explored it with the same care he had with the first one.

After some time, he let his hand slide down her body until it reached the patch of curls between her legs. She parted her legs and lifted her hips to encourage him to bring his hand lower. He did, but he resisted the urge to slide his fingers into her. Instead, he traced the folds of her flesh. She was wet. She was ready for him. But still, he didn't want to rush this, so he continued to tease her by letting his fingertips slip into her and then went back to tracing her flesh.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders, and she let out a frustrated cry. Maybe it was wicked, but he still refused to go into her. With a grin, he kissed her neck and then brought his head to one of her breasts. He brushed his tongue across her nipple and then brought it into his mouth and suckled lightly on it.

"Julian, you're going to drive me mad," she whispered as she wiggled her hips closer to him.

He supposed he had teased her long enough. Deciding he'd satisfy the poor lady, he slid two fingers into her. She let out a sigh that was a blend of relief and demanding need. He stroked her core in an effort to keep that need mounting, and the method worked. She began to rock her hips against him, and she began moaning in a way that let him know she was fully aroused.

He shifted so that he was kneeling in front of her and brought his tongue to her sensitive nub. She sharply inhaled and wrapped her legs around his shoulders. He resumed his stroking, seeking how he might best bring her to completion.

When she reached her peak, she cried out his name. He slowed his ministrations while her flesh clenched and unclenched around his fingers. When her body relaxed, he knew she was satisfied.

He removed his fingers from her and moved so that he was on top of her. He took a moment to study her face. He didn't know how it was possible, but the more he looked at her, the more beautiful she became, and he had thought she'd been one of the loveliest ladies he'd ever seen when they met.

He gave her a lingering kiss before he entered her. He groaned. It seemed there would always be that initial surge of pleasure upon entering her. He had thought he had only been experiencing it because this activity was still new to him, but despite being together as often as they had, it hadn't diminished. It was still as wonderful as it'd been the first time he had made love to her.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him deeper into her. The rest of the world slipped away as he made love to her in

earnest. All he could do was give into the need to be consumed by her. The momentum of his thrusting grew more insistent as his passion rose to its peak. Then his body burst with pleasure, and he cried out to her. He grew taut as he filled her with his seed. When the intensity of his orgasm ebbed, he collapsed in her arms.

Reluctant to part from her, he spent considerable time kissing her. “I’ll never love anyone but you,” he whispered and then kissed her cheek.

“You’re the only one I want,” she whispered in return and then yawned.

Considering how little sleep they’d had for quite some time, he didn’t blame her for being tired even though it wasn’t even ten. He felt tired as well. He got off of her and helped her under the blankets and tucked them around them both so that they were comfortable. Then he drew her into his arms and closed his eyes.

Tonight, he didn’t worry he might wake up to find he was stuck back in June 17 all over again. He just knew that when he woke up, he would be with her and that time would still be moving forward. With a smile, he drifted off to sleep.

Julian’s dreams that night came as a series of memories he’d long ago forgotten. These were all memories of his life as it had been before that fateful day he woke up on June 17. Little details time had erased came rushing back to him.

He recalled with clarity how he’d grown up at this estate tending to his studies with the instructor his parents had hired. He recalled learning to ride a horse. He recalled there had once been a dog that he had spent hours playing with. He recalled that Francis and his parents came for visits before Phillip was born. He recalled how his parents hosted a few dinner parties and balls, though they were nothing as elaborate as what one would find in London.

He also remembered that once in a while his mother would mention the duel. “Your father was foolish to do it,” she would mutter under her breath when she thought his father wasn’t listening.

One time, when Julian was twelve, his father heard her. “It wasn’t something I wanted to do,” his father replied. “It was something I had to do.”

“Why? What did it accomplish?” she asked.

“Protection,” he replied with tears in his eyes. Then he left the room before either one of them could see him cry.

“He always says that, but it means nothing since there’s nothing we need protection from,” she told Julian.

And that was the last he heard about it.

When Julian became an adult, he decided it was time to leave the estate. Julian's father argued with him that he must stay, but Julian wasn't willing to do that, not after he had wasted his whole life here.

"I'm a grown gentleman," Julian said. "I have to leave sometime."

"But it's not safe," his father argued.

Julian laughed. "Why not?"

His father hesitated for a long moment but finally said, "You wouldn't believe me. Your mother never believed me. She almost had me committed to an asylum. I had to stop talking about it so that I could stay here to watch over you."

"And you did that," Julian said. "I appreciate everything you've done, but I have to grow up and leave at some point. I can't be a child forever. I need to make my way in the world. I'm going to leave, and there's nothing you can do about it."

He didn't know if his mother chose to go with him because she was tired of being stuck on the property or if his father wished for her to keep watch over him. All he knew was that as he and his mother passed over the bridge, she said, "It's nothing but superstition for your father to think he can't leave this estate. He's been like that since your grandfather died."

Julian and his mother stayed with Francis' family in London for a few months before he found a townhouse to rent. After being away for a year, his mother said she missed his father and returned to the estate to be with him.

Julian, however, never wanted to return to live there. He would stop in once a year to spend a few weeks there, but he always returned to London.

Julian and Francis became good friends over the years. They went almost everywhere together. They would go to balls and see which ladies were in their Seasons. Julian enjoyed talking and dancing with ladies, but his interest didn't go beyond that. Francis, however, was looking for a wife.

"I don't know why you're in such a hurry to marry," Julian told Francis one time. "We don't have to seriously consider anyone for marriage until we're in our thirties or forties."

"You shouldn't wait that long," Francis replied. "Half of your life will be over. You should enjoy love while you're young enough to fully enjoy it."

Julian just laughed off his friend's words as silly romantic thinking. His mind wasn't on marriage. It was on seeing the world. But he had to have money to travel. He entered a lot of wagers. Sometimes he made money, and at other times, he lost it, but for the most part, he made enough to make up for the amount he lost. In the end, he only

got to visit Italy and Sweden. His mother had died while he was in Sweden. He didn't get his father's missive until a month after the fact.

He was ready to return to the estate to visit her grave when his father sent another missive imploring him to stay in London. *As much as I want to see you, you must not come. It is better for your sake if you never return to Nightingale Hall,* his father had written.

He spent the next month debating whether he should obey his father or not. Then he received word that his father had died. That prompted him to make arrangements to return to the estate.

"You need to invest some of your money before you leave," Francis told him. "I keep telling you that you need to think of the future."

"I can't think about that right now," Julian replied. "I have to bury my father and see what condition the estate is in."

"Let me take care of the investments for you then," Francis said. "I've already made a substantial sum of money. You told me you wished you hadn't wasted so much on those wagers. I can help you make up for that. You need something to leave your heirs."

Francis was right. Julian had just turned twenty-eight. It was time he started taking things seriously. "All right. I'll give you what I have, and you can invest it."

"You won't be sorry," Francis promised him. "You're going to end up with more than enough for generations to come."

"I don't know what you're more excited about," Julian teased him as he gave his cousin the money. "Marrying Lady Kimberly or investing my money. If I didn't know better, I'd say you plan to use my money to elope with her."

Francis laughed at his joke.

That was the last time Julian spoke to him.

Julian returned to the estate. The day was overcast but not raining. He summoned the vicar, buried his father next to his mother, thinking that, despite the fact that they didn't always get along, they must have loved each other. Once his mother returned to the estate, she never left again, and his father didn't live long after her death.

Julian paid the vicar and thanked him for coming. Then he went to the library to check the financial accounts of the estate.

The missive came around ten that evening. The rain had just started as the footman handed it to him.

"Who gave you this?" Julian asked when he didn't recognize the seal.

"A man I've never seen before, my lord," the footman replied.

"He didn't identify himself?"

"No. He had bright green eyes, but that's the only discerning feature I noticed about him."

Noting how late it was, Julian asked, "Does he need to stay here

for the night?"

"He's already gone. He left with two other men."

Julian frowned. "There were three men in all to deliver one missive?"

The footman shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. They're already gone."

Despite the strangeness of it, Julian relieved the footman of his duties for the night. He set the missive aside and went back to the ledger. It wasn't until an hour later that he read the missive.

He took the missive seriously until he got to the line about being forced to live the same day over and over once the clock struck midnight. At that point, Julian rolled his eyes, went to the fireplace, and threw the missive into the flames of the fire.

It was someone's idea of a joke. Someone who had nothing better to do had sent something meant to scare him. It was to his benefit he didn't give into such nonsense.

He picked up the candle on the desk and went up to his bedchamber to go to bed for the night.

And then… And then…

Julian opened his eyes. He was wrapped up with Willow in a red blanket. It was dawn. Sunlight was just beginning to come in through the windows. The tub was still full of cold water. Two of the four candles were still lit, though most of the wax had melted during the night.

Julian focused. He knew he had spent two centuries stuck in the same day. That missive had not been a joke. Violet had meant what she wrote. There was a curse hovering over this place. And those three men the footman had seen…

They had to be the cat, owl, and horse that Violet had transformed into men. The night he received that missive must have been the night they became men. And then they left the property to join her.

Julian was beginning to understand what Willow had meant about her memories being removed and how aspects of her past seemed like a dream. After two centuries of living out the same day, his past had become a blur, and at times, that part of his life had been more like a dream than a reality. Except, this morning, all of those memories from his life were easy to remember. The past two centuries of being stuck in June 17, however, were starting to blur together. Surprisingly, those two centuries were beginning to feel like they had never happened.

It had to be something in the magic on this property. And that meant Willow was not going to suffer some malady. She really was going to be all right. They were experiencing similar things but in different ways. As Willow had said, this was how their timelines were

meant to line up and merge together.

His gaze went to her. She was in deep sleep, but she looked fine. Her cheeks were full of color. She looked at peace. He lowered his head and kissed her. As much as he wanted to stay with her, he needed to get back to his grandfather's journals. There had been a duel that had taken place between his father and his uncle before he was born. His father had said he'd killed his brother to protect everyone. Maybe his father had been telling the truth. Maybe he hadn't been foolish. Maybe it had been necessary. Whatever the case, it was obvious it had cast a dark shadow over his life. He'd never gotten over it. He had probably lived with regret every day of his life over what he'd done.

And perhaps his father was unable to leave here. Maybe magic had been binding him to this place, and while Julian and his mother had been able to cross the bridge, maybe he couldn't. Only he didn't tell anyone about it. Just as Julian hadn't told the servants what was happening to him. Who would believe such lunacy?

The more Julian thought about it, the more convinced he was that his father hadn't been superstitious like his mother assumed. He had a real basis for what he thought and did. His father had been scared for him. He'd been afraid if he went to London, then he wouldn't be able to watch over him, and when Julian asked him why, he'd said, "*You wouldn't believe me. Your mother never believed me. She almost had me committed to an asylum. I had to stop talking about it so that I could stay here to watch over you.*"

But he later changed his mind when he sent Julian the missive warning him to never return to Nightingale Hall. What changed his mind? Did he figure out that Violet would pass the curse down to him? The missive she sent specifically said she was coming for him. She wasn't ever going to come for his father. Maybe his father knew it.

He either knew it, or he figured it out.

What was it his mother had said as she went with him to London? *"It's nothing but superstition for your father to think he can't leave this estate. He's been like that since your grandfather died."*

Julian's grandfather must have known something important. He suspected his father had believed him. It was why Julian's mother thought him mad and had thought to send him to the asylum.

But his grandfather hadn't been mad. And his father hadn't been, either. Julian needed to find out what they knew. If it had something to do with that missive, he needed to figure it out. Otherwise, he and Willow might be in some kind of danger.

He quietly got out of the bed and collected his clothes. When he reached the doorway connecting their bedchamber, he looked back at Willow. She was still asleep. He wanted a lifetime with her. He

wanted it more than he could remember ever wanting anything. All of his longing to be gone from this estate so he could explore the world failed in comparison to his desire to be with her.

He caught the flicker of a red and gold thread that shimmered between him and Willow. Willow let out a sigh and turned toward him, but she didn't wake up. He blinked in surprise, and the thread vanished.

Willow had mentioned that thread. It was just as she described it.

He didn't know what to make of that thread, but he was sure there was a reason for it. There was a reason for everything that was happening. And there was only one place he could think of to find the answers.

Turning from Willow, he hurried to wash up and dress for the day.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Willow woke up, her mind was clear. The previous day had been like walking through a foggy day. Parts of it were filled with moments where she almost felt like she had slipped into a dreamlike trance, but other parts—the parts when Julian was with her—were the only ones that felt real.

She still knew she came from the future. She remembered her parents and the other people she'd known. But the things that had been a part of that time had been wiped from her memory. Maybe it should have alarmed her, but it didn't. When she made the decision to marry Julian, she'd made the decision to stay here permanently. Something about the magic that had brought her here understood that and had moved in to make her a part of this timeline.

Up until the moment the vicar had united her and Julian together in marriage, there must have been a way for her to return to her time. It was something that would have probably shown up at some point, but it wouldn't show up now. There was no going back.

And that was fine with her. She had no desire to go back. She hadn't realized it when she was in the future, but something had been missing. There had been a hole in her life. It was why it'd been difficult for her to establish anything permanent in that life. The only relationship that had seemed real had been the one she'd had with her parents, and they weren't alive anymore.

Willow sat up in the bed and glanced over at the spot where Julian had slept the night before, but he was gone. Her gaze went to the window. It was late in the morning. She slipped out of the bed and went to Julian's bedchamber. He wasn't there.

She turned to leave his bedchamber when she noticed the glimmer of a red and gold thread on the floor. It went under the door of his bedchamber that led to the hallway. Curious, she went to the door and opened it. The thread continued down the hallway and went to the steps. She blinked in surprise. Did this mean she would always be able to find Julian regardless of where he was?

That hadn't happened before they married. It had to be linked to her decision to unite her future with his. She understood what it meant for her memories to fade away, but the thread didn't make sense. There had to be a purpose for it. She was sure of it. Just as there had been a purpose for them to be stuck here and just as there had been a purpose for her to be able to cross into this time. Everything connected somehow.

She hurried to get ready for the day then summoned the maids to take the tub away. She left the bedchamber and followed the thread

down the stairs. It ended up leading her to the library.

Julian had his head bowed over one of his grandfather's journals. Other journals were next to him, also open. He was so involved in what he was reading that he didn't notice her.

Testing the magic, she willed him to look at her.

He glanced up from the journal. As soon as he noticed her, he got up from his chair and went over to her so he could bring her into his arms and kiss her. She wasn't sure if the magic had caused him to hug and kiss her, but she was sure he had looked at her because she wished it.

"How are you feeling?" he asked when the kiss ended.

"I feel great," she replied. Giving him a smile, she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into him. "I can't remember a time when I've felt better."

He didn't hide his relief. "That's good. I was sure you were right about the magic taking away parts of your future that didn't belong in this time, but seeing you this morning puts my mind at ease."

"I'm sorry I worried you."

"It wasn't your fault. It was whatever the magic is doing. It did something to me, too. I've forgotten how long the past two centuries were for me. It all seems like a blur. I also remember so many things before that first June 17. It feels like I buried my father recently, and it feels like I last spoke to Francis only a month ago. I even remember getting that missive from Violet, or Rose, depending on what you want to call her. The footman said three men were here that night, but it was the one with bright green eyes who gave the missive to him."

"I remember him. He's the cat."

"Yes, that's what you told me. Do you still remember him as a man?"

She nodded. "I remember coming to this estate, but I don't know how I got here. It must have been in a carriage."

"I don't know. You mentioned something about being able to travel without horses."

"Then maybe I walked. All I know is that when I crossed the bridge, I saw these purple and pink colors, and Violet was here cleaning the manor to get it ready for me. Or maybe she was getting that mirror ready so that I would join you in this time."

"I never saw her," Julian said. "The only reason I know what she looks like is because of the memory the fairy showed us."

Willow nodded. She recalled that memory, too.

"I learned something this morning while going through my grandfather's journals. I'll tell you in a moment." He released her and went to shut the door. When he returned to her, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the desk.

She smiled at how playful he was being. He sat in the chair and held her securely on his lap.

"Remember when we did this before?" he asked.

"Yes, and I remember you taking liberties with me though we were not married yet. You were quite wicked."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Wicked? Me? You just got through telling me about how people in your time sat on each other's laps and how both ladies and gentlemen showed off their legs in a piece of clothing called shorts. You said you'd even worn shorts."

She stared at him in shock for a couple of seconds before she recalled telling him that. "Maybe I told you that, but I must have been teasing you. Surely, I didn't actually go out naked in public."

"You were serious when you told me about it."

That must have been one of the things she'd forgotten ever doing. "I can't imagine doing something like that."

"I won't lie. I feel much better with you here than in that time. I wouldn't want you showing your legs to others. One of the benefits of being your husband is that I'm the only one who is allowed to see them."

"Of course, you're the only one allowed to see them."

She simply didn't understand how she could have shown such little care about baring so much of her body for others to see. Quite frankly, her nonchalant attitude toward the whole thing was appalling.

She didn't want to think of it. She pushed that peculiar conversation from her mind and glanced at the journal on the desk. She blinked. She was sure the handwriting had been challenging to read when she saw it before. But the words were easy for her to read now.

She leaned toward the journal. "Your grandfather found a fairy?"

"Yes, that's what I wanted to tell you. He finally found a family of fairies in Ireland and brought one to this estate."

She turned her gaze back to him. "Where is it?"

"I don't know. He said if he gave the fairy's location away that he might put it in danger."

"Is this a different fairy from the one that's in the gazebo?"

Julian nodded. "My grandfather wrote that he knew Rose had trapped and hidden a fairy somewhere on this property, though he had no idea where it was."

"Rose? He didn't call her Violet?"

"No. There's no mention of Violet in here. Rose is the only lady's name he mentions."

"But she is the same person."

"In your time, she was Violet. In this time, she is Rose. Just as the seal and image on the missive she gave me suggests, she goes by both

names."

"That's why the two colors we see at the bridge and on the bars of that fairy's cage are pink and purple. As you said, it's her calling card. Her colors designate her brand of magic."

"We seem to have our brand as well," he said. "Red for you and gold for me. Except our magic only seems to work when we're together, such as holding hands in the gazebo."

"It's gotten stronger since we married."

"I noticed that."

"There has to be a reason for it."

"I think so, too." Julian paused for a moment then added, "My grandfather wrote that he brought the fairy here for protection. He couldn't stop Rose. All he could do was offer us something to help us defeat her."

Willow's eyebrows furrowed. "Us? As in 'you and me'?"

"My grandfather wrote that the fairy he brought here would give some of his magic to two people. One was me. The other person was the last living relative in the family line. That person is you. My title became extinct when you inherited the estate. My grandfather wrote that when Rose placed the family under a curse, part of that curse was killing off the title, and the only way to do that is to make sure there are no male heirs left to inherit it. The fairy also told him the last remaining family member would cross over into this time, and at that point, the fairy would show us what we need to know to break the curse we are under."

When Julian didn't continue, she asked, "Is that it?"

"He thought the less he revealed in the journal, the better. He said the fairy would give us the answers we were looking for."

She supposed someone who was aware of the threat Rose posed would not want to divulge too much in a journal where Rose could potentially find it and destroy it. It was best to keep the information locked away with a fairy who could make sure the right people received it.

Willow took a deep breath. "We need to look for a fairy." She scanned the room. "Do you think it's in the manor or outside?"

"I thought we'd see if the cat, owl, and horse might know where it is," Julian replied.

"They were used by Rose to do her bidding."

"Yes, but they hate her. They are no longer men. They are back in their animal form. And, they showed us where the other fairy is."

"That's true."

"I think when you came into this time, they got their free will back."

She nodded. "All right. We'll probably need to ride a horse since

the fairy could be anywhere. I should put on my riding outfit."

"I will, too, but we should get something to eat first. We could be out all day. I'll ask Cook to make something while we change into our riding outfits." He gave her a kiss before he went to speak with the cook.

Willow's eyebrows furrowed when she realized Julian intended for them to ride the same horse. She didn't mind taking the horse who had once been a person in her time. That was logical, but up to now, they had taken two horses.

"You want us to ride your father's horse together?" she asked him as the stablemaster went to get a double saddle.

"If we are together, we'll be touching. Touching is how we saw that fairy in the gazebo."

"I didn't think of that. That's a good idea."

He gave her a sly smile. "It'll also be nice to have you in my arms." His fingers brushed hers, and she shivered from the pleasure of the light touch.

She wrapped her hand around his and returned his smile.

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Everlasting Gypsy is ready, my lord," the stablemaster said as he came up to them.

Julian took the reins and thanked the stablemaster.

She thought Julian might release her hand, but he didn't. Instead, he let his thumb trace hers in a way that excited and calmed her at the same time.

"Will you ask the horse, cat, and owl if they know where the other fairy is?" Julian asked.

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Why do you assume I'm the only one who can communicate with them? I'm sure you can, too."

His eyes grew wide as if he hadn't thought that he might be able to do that.

Before he could try it, the cat approached her, sat down, and looked expectantly at her. She blinked in surprise. Well, maybe Julian was right. Maybe the animals could only deal directly with her. Maybe there was something in the magic used on them that would only allow them to understand her because they'd been able to talk to her as people in her time.

She glanced at the horse, and it seemed to be waiting for her to speak. The owl hooted from the rafters above their heads. When her gaze went to it, it also seemed to be waiting for her.

She searched for the stablemaster, but, thankfully, he was too busy

to pay attention to them. She cleared her throat. “Julian and I believe there’s a second fairy on this property. Do any of you know where that fairy is?”

The cat glanced at the owl and the horse. The horse shook its head and neighed. The owl cocked its head to the side in what seemed to be a thoughtful gesture but didn’t give a hoot to say it knew where the fairy was. The cat purred and then headed for the doors of the stable.

Julian hurried to help her onto the horse and then got up behind her. She turned to the side because of the dress she wore, and he put one arm around her waist and held onto the reins with his free hand.

The cat glanced back at them and meowed.

The horse snorted in agreement and followed after the cat.

The owl waited until they were out of the stables before it joined them. The cat and horse stopped after they were outside the stables. The owl flew in circles over their heads.

Willow watched as the cat sniffed the air. She found it curious that the cat seemed to be the one who took the lead. Perhaps there was a trait cats had that made them better suited for this particular task.

The cat let out a meow and ran up the side of the stables. Willow frowned. Should cats be able to do that? She knew they could climb trees, but were they so skilled at climbing that they could go up the side of a building like that?

The cat reached the roof, and the owl joined his friend. They could probably see the entire estate from how high up they were.

Willow was beginning to think that finding the other fairy wasn’t going to be easy when the cat let out a meow and leapt down from the roof. At first, Willow thought it was going to suffer harm, but it landed on its feet.

Julian’s grip tightened around her waist, and before she could ask him why he’d done that, the horse went into a full gallop after the cat. The owl hooted and followed after them.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It turned out that the cat led Willow and Julian to a group of trees that were on the back of the property. Something about the group of trees seemed familiar. She recalled seeing these from her time. She went to the recesses of her mind. Would this be one of the memories that were forever gone, or would this be one that she would be able to remember?

After a few moments, the memory came to her. She'd been walking along the property, and she'd taken note of the trees. Most of them were scattered, but there was a particular group of them that had caught her attention. The scattered trees weren't as tall as she remembered. The group of trees, however, hadn't grown at all in two centuries. They looked just as they had when she first saw them.

She focused in on the group of trees, and after a moment, she detected a slight distortion in them. She renewed her hold around Julian's waist and focused in on the trees. The area began to send off a soft ripple of blue colors.

"Do you see the blue color coming from the trees?" she asked Julian.

"Yes, I see it."

As they got closer to the trees, the swirl of blue colors became more pronounced. There was no doubt about it. The other fairy had to be somewhere in those trees.

They reached the trees, and the horse slowed to a stop. Julian got off the horse first then helped her down. She thought the horse would go with them into the trees since the cat and owl did, but he didn't make a move to go in there. Perhaps he wasn't as inclined to explore new things like his companions were.

Julian took her hand, and they followed the cat and owl. It wasn't until they passed the first row of trees that red and gold colors appeared and merged with the blue swirls.

Her steps came to a stop as she watched the way the colors all seemed to blend together, as if they were in perfect harmony. Could this be happening because this particular fairy had been brought here to protect her and Julian?

The cat let out an impatient meow.

She turned her focus back to it, and she and Julian proceeded forward. Before she stepped through the trees, there hadn't seemed to be so many of them in the group, but for some reason, she felt as if she was in a large forest. She glanced around them and couldn't see an end to the trees. Even the sunlight had been blotted out of sight. Had it not been for the colors, the entire area would have been plunged

into darkness.

She thought back to what she'd read about fairies. Some of the myths did speak about fairies living in an altered state of reality. Things like space and time didn't have the same meaning that they did for humans. It was why humans had such a hard time finding them.

As she looked around, she was having trouble picking out the path they were on. It was only because of the cat and owl that she and Julian didn't lose track of where they were going. And, after a while, she began to feel like all they were doing was walking and walking and walking. She kept looking around for anything that appeared different, but all of the trees looked the exact same to her.

After what seemed to be a half hour, she asked, "How long do you think we've been in here?"

"Much longer than should be possible," he whispered as if he was afraid to say anything in case the magic around them would cease. "There can't be more than twenty trees in this area of the property, but there are more trees here than I can count."

"Yes, I noticed that, too. I wonder if we've only just passed the first row of trees, even though it doesn't look like it." She glanced behind them and saw nothing but trees.

"When it comes to magic, anything's possible."

She hesitated to make the suggestion, but after another ten minutes passed, she asked, "Should we let go of our hands to find out where we really are?"

His expression indicated that he wasn't sure releasing hands was a good idea, and while she couldn't blame him, the other part of her—the one that had to know what would happen—prompted her to release his hand.

At once, all of the colors stopped, and the sunlight came in on her, nearly blinding her with how bright it was. She squinted and put her hand up to shade her eyes. She had to fight past the feeling of being dizzy in order to see what was going on around her.

"I didn't say I wanted to let go of your hand," Julian said in surprise.

Her attention went to him, and he was the only thing around her that seemed to be in focus. "I had to know."

She glanced back and saw the horse, which was watching her and Julian. She scanned the trees around them. They were still blurred, but she could make them out well enough to know that they had only made it past the second row of them. Up ahead, she noticed that the owl and cat were moving but seemed to be suspended in one place.

"I know you want to compare what it's like when we're holding hands and when we're not, but this is more than I can handle," Julian said and took her hand.

At once, they were back in the middle of what felt like an endless forest. The sunlight was gone. The blue, red, and gold colors were back to give them the light they needed to see what was around them. The trees were clear to see. For some reason, it was easier to adjust to this state than it had been to adjust to things when they weren't holding hands. It must be the magic in the trees.

She would probably never understand how a fairy's magic worked. It was no wonder the legends and myths about fairies didn't all come to the same conclusions. The fairies probably manipulated things so that humans wouldn't be able to fully understand them. The technique had allowed them to remain out of sight when humans went right by their dwellings. It kept humans from interfering with their way of life.

She and Julian followed the cat and owl at a pace that seemed natural to her but had to be unbelievably slow to the horse that was watching them. She guessed that another hour passed before they came upon a tree that was giving off a blue pulsating light.

The cat ran up the side of the tree and settled on a branch that was next to a hole that had been carved into the trunk. The hole was just above Willow's height. Julian, however, was able to look inside it.

"There's a fairy sleeping in there," Julian told her.

"Is it in a cage?" she asked.

"No, it's curled up in a blanket on a small bed. It looks happy."

The owl settled next to the cat and hooted. Willow's attention went to them. The cat used its paw to reach out and pretend to tap something.

"I'm not sure, but I think the cat wants you to tap the fairy," Willow told Julian.

"Is it safe to touch a fairy?"

"I don't remember reading anything about the dangers of touching them. You don't want to be mean to them. They're powerful creatures. I think as long as you're gentle, you'll be fine."

Julian glanced uneasily at the fairy and then at her. "If it doesn't like being touched, we might feel the effects of its wrath."

Willow noticed the way the cat kept urging them to wake the fairy. "We'll have to risk it." She put her arm around Julian's to brace herself for what was to come. "All right. I'm ready."

He took a deep breath and reached into the hole. A second later, he stepped back. "There. I did it." When the cat meowed, he turned his gaze to it. "I tapped it as gently as I could."

From inside the tree, they heard the fairy yawn.

Willow felt Julian's hold on her tighten. She instinctively moved closer to him so that their bodies were touching. He wasn't the only one who was afraid of what was going to happen next. Some fairies were evil and others good. She assumed Julian's grandfather wouldn't

bring an evil one here, but she couldn't know that for sure.

A sound one might construe as a sigh came from inside the hole. The cat crept closer to the hole and peered inside. Then it turned its face toward Willow and Julian and let out a satisfied meow.

"I think you did what you needed to," she whispered to Julian.

The cat returned to its spot on the branch. The owl hooted as if to ask a question, and the cat meowed a response.

A brighter shade of blue came forth from the hole, and a male fairy with blue clothes and clear wings trimmed in blue emerged from it. The creature smiled a greeting and sat down on the edge of the hole.

Willow wanted to tell Julian she was surprised by how different this fairy's mood was from the one in the gazebo, but she kept quiet. It almost seemed irreverent to speak unless granted permission to do so.

The fairy produced a wand, spun it around so that fairy dust came forth from it. He collected the dust in his hand. He opened his palm then blew the dust into the air in front of Julian. The dust swirled from the height of Julian's head and went down to the ground. It expanded until there was the form of a person in the center.

Julian and Willow took a step back, and she clasped her hand more firmly in his.

The dust vanished, and in its place was an old gentleman with gray hair.

"That's my grandfather," Julian whispered. Then he shot a startled glance at the fairy as if afraid it would strike him down for talking.

The fairy, however, didn't seem annoyed.

Willow and Julian exhaled in relief.

"I am Herbert Azazel, the Earl of Blackwell," the gentleman said. "If all goes well, I am speaking to my grandson, Julian. I wasn't sure if you'd find the journals and books I saved, but if you are listening to me now, I am assured you have found them. I am also assured that the individual who is the last heir of the estate is with you."

Willow studied Julian's grandfather and realized he could not see them. She doubted he could hear them, either. This was a message his grandfather had made a long time ago, and it was only because of the fairy that they were able to receive it.

"There is a lady I once knew," his grandfather continued. "She was Lady Rose, the daughter of the Duke of Morana. Her family was wealthy and highly esteemed in London. Our fathers arranged a marriage between us. But, despite her beauty, there was nothing soft or warm about her. She didn't want to be a wife and a mother. She wanted to be young forever.

"During our betrothal, she set sail for Ireland. She was gone for almost a year, and in that time, I met your grandmother and fell in love with her. I tried to talk myself out of being with her, but in the

end, I made the decision to marry her. As you can imagine, the resulting scandal was anything but pleasant. By the time Lady Rose returned, your grandmother was already expecting our oldest. Our oldest was your uncle. We only had two children. Your uncle and your father."

Julian's grandfather paused, and the image wavered for a moment. When the image grew solid again, his grandfather said, "I didn't think this was going to be so difficult to explain after all these years."

Julian's grandfather paused again, and Willow could see him renewing his efforts to remove his feelings from the message he wanted to leave behind.

"Ending an engagement is no small matter, and the cost of making a deal with a magical creature can be great," he continued. "There's always something you must be willing to give in return for magic. Lady Rose went to Ireland to seek out a fairy who would grant her eternal youth, and she got it with the understanding she would give him her firstborn son. That son had to be the rightful heir of this estate. Her plan had been to marry me, have a son, and then give him to the fairy. After that, she was going to kill me and live on at this estate as the Lady of Blackwell forever.

"My marriage to your grandmother upset that plan. I was afraid she was going to kill your grandmother in order to force a marriage with me, so I began to search for a fairy who could help me. The years passed, and since you read my journals, you know that finding a fairy isn't easy.

"Rose didn't kill your grandmother like I expected. Instead, she waited until your uncle was grown. She seduced him. I don't know if it was a genuine attraction he had for her or if she found a way to cast a spell on him when he met her, but he conceived a child with her. When I saw her, I knew who she was. She was almost as young as the day I last saw her. She still ages, but it's extremely slow compared to the rest of us. Only when she gives that fairy what he wants will she truly be immortal.

"I tried to reason with your uncle. I told him who she was, but he refused to listen to me. He was determined to marry her so that the child she carried would be a legitimate heir. Your father, however, believed me. Together, we locked your uncle in a room. We meant to stop him from marrying her. But the pull to be with her was too great for him. For all I know, she used magic to make him so obsessed with her that he couldn't live without her."

The image wavered again, and he wiped his eyes. "Your uncle was dead as soon as he met her. She wouldn't have let him live. She would have killed him after the heir was born and taken over the estate. Then she would have gotten rid of your father and everyone else who

could inherit the title. The entire family would have been ruined.

"I'd been looking for a fairy for a very long time, but I was sure I finally found one while working through my maps. And I was right. I did. So I left for Ireland to get a fairy to help us. Your father was supposed to keep your uncle locked away. Unfortunately, your uncle managed to get out and was on his way to find Rose. Your father caught up to him, and the two ended up in a duel." He swallowed. "Your uncle died, and Rose ended up killing the child when it was born. The only good thing I can say is that your grandmother died before that all happened. She was spared all of that pain.

"By the time I brought the fairy here, your father was living at this estate with his wife, and you were a year old. I brought the fairy here with me, and your father and I decided to put him here among these trees in order to hide him. I'm not sure if your father told you or your mother what happened since killing his brother had nearly destroyed him. He probably just wanted to forget it all happened.

"I should explain about this fairy who has enabled me to speak to you long after my death. He agreed to help me in exchange for this land we're standing on. Julian, you might be the holder of the title, but the fairy is the rightful owner of the land. No one who comes after you will own the land, either, though they will be allowed to live here.

"I wanted to make sure Rose couldn't harm anyone in the family again. The fairy's task is to keep her off of this property. The moat has a protection spell over it. The only way she can cross over the bridge is if someone who belongs to this estate brings her here."

Willow glanced at the cat and owl. She was sure Julian's grandfather didn't imagine she would be able to bring animals off of the estate, turn them into people, and get through the barrier that way. Only, Rose's magic had only worked when the animals were in human form. Something about going back to this time had changed them back to animals, and now they were free to make their own choices. She had no idea what happened while they were forced to do her bidding as humans, but they definitely didn't like her.

"Unfortunately," Julian's grandfather continued, "Rose came up with another plan. She returned to Ireland, but the evil fairy who was willing to give her eternal youth wouldn't help her this time. Instead, he put a curse on her. Since she didn't bring him the child he wanted at the time he required it, she is now required to bring him two heirs of this estate."

Willow felt Julian stiffen next to her, and she experienced an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"One must be an heir living in this time," his grandfather said. "The other must be the last heir."

Yes, that was what Willow was afraid of when his grandfather mentioned two heirs. All along, she and Julian had wondered why they were the only two who had been unable to leave while all the others could. And now they knew. Rose had used her fairy's magic to trap them here. Hence the pink and purple colors at the bridge.

Julian slipped his arm around her, and she held onto him as she did her best to prepare herself for what was going to come next.

"There's no telling how long it'll take for the title to become extinct," his grandfather continued. "But when that day comes, Rose will return. I don't know how Rose will get you and the last heir on this property in the same time, but she will need to do that in order to bring you both to that fairy. If Rose succeeds in binding you both, the two of you will be enslaved to do that fairy's bidding for as long as he shall live." He paused. "Fairies can live thousands of years."

Willow was beginning to wish they hadn't gone on this quest to find the other fairy. She didn't really want to hear all of this.

"If, however," his grandfather said, "you can bring the Wild Hunt upon Rose before she is able to bind you both, then she will be the one sent to the evil fairy, who will enslave her instead."

"How are we supposed to bring the Wild Hunt on her?" Julian asked.

That was a good question. Willow glanced at the fairy. He gestured to the image of Julian's grandfather, so she turned her attention back to it.

"There is a good fairy that Rose managed to trap somewhere on this property," Julian's grandfather said. "Your father and I have searched for it, but we can't find it. Apparently, it is hidden from us. The blue fairy that I brought here said he will impart enough magic on you and the last heir so you'll be able to see it. The way to get the Wild Hunt to come down upon Rose is by releasing the fairy she trapped. You can release the fairy by giving the fairy her wand back. I don't know where Rose will have the wand, but she won't be careless enough to leave it behind somewhere. It's going to be on her."

So that was how the fairy could be freed from its cage. Right now, Willow felt as trapped and hopeless as that fairy did. In fact, she thought she might throw up. She hadn't realized the predicament she and Julian were in was so dire.

The image of Julian's grandfather wavered again.

"I hope your father and I have been able to do enough to protect you and the future heir," his grandfather softly spoke. "Remember that Rose can't cross the bridge until she's invited here. That might give you and the last heir time to figure out how you're going to get the wand. All it takes is one of you getting it to the fairy."

The image vanished, and the fairy rose to his feet, looking pleased

that he had been able to deliver the message to them.

Julian glanced at Willow before asking the fairy, “How are we supposed to see something as small as a wand and get it to the fairy? Willow and I have to be together to even see the fairy in the gazebo.”

The fairy thought for a moment then waved his wand. He caught the fairy dust and then blew it in their direction. Though it swirled around them and settled on their skin, Willow didn’t feel any different. She looked at Julian, who didn’t seem any more comforted than she did.

The fairy offered them both a gesture that Willow didn’t realize was meant to be “good-bye” until he waved his wand and sent them out of the trees.

The shock nearly caused Willow to fall, and she might have if Julian hadn’t been holding her. It took Willow a few seconds to get used to the sunlight.

The cat and owl settled in front of them. The cat let out a mournful wail, and the owl gave them a look Willow could only take to mean that he, along with the cat, was sorry to hear the curse was far worse than any of them could have imagined.

It wasn’t until she felt the first tear fall to her cheek that she realized she was crying. She’d read about evil fairies. They were so terrible that she couldn’t understand why anyone would be so cruel as to send someone to their dark and awful land. Willow’s strength left her. As she started to collapse, Julian picked her up into his arms and carried her to the horse so he could take her back to the manor.

Chapter Twenty-Five

All the way back to the manor, Willow couldn't stop crying, so Julian took her to the library and gave her a glass of sherry to settle her nerves. Once the tears weren't coming so fast, he urged her to show him the passage in the book that addressed the topic of evil fairies. She protested, saying he didn't want to read it, but he had to know what was going to happen if Rose succeeded in binding them. He couldn't go on in ignorance about the threat they faced. He had a responsibility to do what he could to help them both.

Willow finally picked up one of the books and searched through it for the passage he was looking for. He brought her a pillow and blanket from upstairs, put the pillow on his lap, and encouraged her to lay her head on it. Then he wrapped the blanket around her. He caressed her back until she drifted off to sleep.

It was only then that he turned his attention to the book.

The cost of obtaining magic from nefarious fairies can be something as insignificant as offering a gold coin to something as significant as offering one's flesh and blood. The greater the magic one wants, the greater the price will be. Take great care before requesting anything from these creatures. If one is unable to give the payment required, the unfortunate soul will be enslaved to this creature for as long as the creature shall live.

Anyone who finds himself bound to such a fairy will be compelled to do whatever fancies said fairy. These creatures are known for all sorts of dark deeds. They've been known to torment their captives for sport. Torment takes on many forms. It can be as simple as watching crows pluck out one's eyes only to restore the eyes and watch the crows pluck them out all over again. Torment can be as complicated as sending the spirit of madness into the captive's mind until the captive longs for the relief of death.

But there are instances where the captive will be sent to do the fairy's bidding. These particular fairies are known for craving precious jewels, so captives are often given the task of going into the belly of the Earth to retrieve them. At times, the captives will be sent to torment mortals who roam the world freely. This form of torment can be harmless pranks such as making the mortal think someone is calling his name or sending the mortal nightmares. Torment can also be something far more serious like sending out siren songs to lure sailors to a shore where they will starve to death listening to the haunting tune.

What these nefarious creatures desire above all else, however, are human babies. The captives might be called on to kidnap them. A human baby is considered the best of all prized possessions because babies are full of innocence and light. It's this innocence and light that these particular

fairies need to sustain their lives. One human baby can provide them one hundred years. Human babies are their favorite feast. It is their ambrosia.

Julian had to stop reading for a moment. He swallowed the bile that rose up in his throat. The things he had read up to now had been uncomfortable, but this last passage, especially the one about the babies, made him sick to his stomach. It was no wonder Willow had been crying.

He closed his eyes and let the information settle in his mind. He had to stay strong. He had to fight.

His grandfather didn't say the situation was hopeless. Rose needed both him and Willow. She couldn't just send one of them to the evil fairy. That gave him and Willow a slight advantage. Granted, it didn't seem like much since neither he nor Willow were as cunning as a lady who was willing to sacrifice her own child for the sake of eternal youth.

He caressed Willow's cheek. If it were possible that just one of them would go to this evil fairy, he would go on her behalf. But they were linked together. They had been linked together from the moment that evil fairy told Rose she needed to bring him two heirs.

What if he and Willow never invited her? Was it possible that they could keep her away for as long as they lived?

No. All it would take was for someone or something that belonged on this property to invite her. That was how she was able to come onto this property in the future. The cat, owl, and horse belonged here. Rose had used them to come onto this property in the future. After that, she had either released them from their duties willingly, or she'd been forced to. One thing he was certain of was that those animals didn't want to do her bidding. If they had, they would have invited her here already.

He turned his attention back to the book he'd been reading. There were a few black and white illustrations of what the author claimed to be actual accounts from people who'd stumbled across the evil fairies.

One illustration showed fairies laughing while they dangled food just above a person's head. The man had gone without food for so long that he was abnormally skinny. The man was unable to reach the food. Hence, the torment they were putting him through. Another illustration showed a fairy putting a creature called a changeling into a crib while the other fairy stole a human baby. Then there was an illustration of a captive human being forced to fight another captive human while the fairies snickered at them. The last illustration showed a group of fairies dancing around open graves and, from the looks of it, eating cut up portions of human bodies.

Julian closed the book. He couldn't keep looking through it. It was

frightening him to the point where he was tempted to never invite Rose here. And then what would happen? Would she die out? Or, if he and Willow had a child, would she just pass the curse on to the boy or girl? It was possible Willow would outlive him. Then what? Would she have to deal with Rose all by herself? Or would their child be the last heir instead of Willow? Obviously, a child would change things. Maybe the child would fulfill the requirements that she needed an heir living in this time period *and* needing the last remaining heir. Perhaps the child would unwittingly invite her here.

He had a responsibility to protect Willow and any children they had. He was going to have to invite Rose here. He was going to have to deal with her himself.

Granted, it was going to put Willow in harm's way, but there was nothing he could do about that. All he could do was hope he'd be able to stop Rose before she could get to Willow. He just needed to get the wand and give it to the green fairy before Rose could bind him and Willow.

He released an uneasy breath. He wasn't without magic. The blue fairy had given him and Willow some protection. He bet it was why he and Willow started seeing the red and gold thread connecting them since they married. It was why they were able to see the green fairy when they touched each other in the gazebo. It was probably why the cat, owl, and horse were able to help them.

He closed his eyes. He was going to have to do this. He didn't know how he was going to tell Willow, but he was going to have to do it. Tomorrow. He'd tell her tomorrow. She'd been through enough for one day. He didn't need to burden her with anything else. He opened his eyes and rubbed her back in gentle, soothing motions, pretending he didn't notice the heaviness that lingered in the air.

"You want to invite Rose here?" Willow asked the next morning.

She turned from the window in the drawing room and looked at Julian as he finished pouring tea into their cups. He set the teapot on the tray and straightened up.

After they ate, Julian had asked her to join him in this room, but he had waited until the butler left them with the tea before he told her what was on his mind.

It was no wonder he had been unusually quiet the previous evening. She'd known everything the blue fairy had revealed to them was on his mind, but she never imagined he had reached the conclusion that they should let Rose cross the bridge.

Julian walked over to her and took her hands in his. "I don't want

to do it. I feel like I need to do it."

"Why?"

"Because she's not going anywhere. If she doesn't come for us, she'll probably come for the children we're going to have."

Willow felt a shiver crawl up her spine. "What do you mean she might come for our children? We're the only ones the curse affects."

"My grandfather didn't mention us by name."

"He did so. He referred to you several times by name."

"He addressed me by name as he gave me the message, but he didn't specify I had to be the one Rose came for. He just said that she needed an heir in this time and the last heir. If you think about it, a son could fill both of those requirements now that we're married."

She shivered again and crossed her arms in a protective gesture. "I don't like where this is going."

"I don't, either, but I don't want her posing a threat to us or our children forever."

"Certainly, there will come a time when she'll have to die. As long as she doesn't satisfy that evil fairy, she will keep aging. If we just tell our children what's happening, they'll be careful. We'll instruct the servants not to invite any ladies here. The horse, cat, and owl don't want her here. They won't bring her over to this side of the bridge."

Julian gave her a look that told her that, while he understood why she was resistant to the idea, he was determined to follow through with it.

"Why must you do this?" she asked.

He paused for a moment then said, "Because while I'm alive, I'll be the one who has to confront her. I can't leave you or our child with that possibility."

Tears filled her eyes, and one of them slid down her cheek. She brushed it away and willed the others to stop, but she couldn't seem to quit crying. She'd had such a difficult time calming down yesterday, and today might not be any easier, especially with this new information.

Julian brought her into his arms, and she clung to him.

"I'm frightened," she whispered.

"I am, too," he admitted, "but it has to be done. We need to end the curse."

As much as she hated to know the answer, she needed to prepare herself. She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced out, "When do you plan to invite her?"

"I was thinking of doing it in a couple of days. I don't want to wait too long, but I want a little more time with you, just in case…"

Her heart sank. *Just in case Rose succeeds.* It was too terrible to say aloud, but it was a very real possibility.

“I love you, Willow. If I could make it so that I was the only one she was coming after, I’d do it. Then, at least, you could be free to live on in peace.”

“I don’t want to live without you. I might not remember the details of my past, but I know I was lonely. I just didn’t know it until I met you. Whatever happens, I want us to be together.”

He tightened his hold on her and kissed the top of her head. She closed her eyes and continued softly crying into his shoulder.

A couple of nights later, Julian held Willow as she slept. He had tried to make the most of the past three days, but there was an air of heaviness that hung between them. It’d been there ever since they learned why Rose had bound them to the same property in the same time. She’d been patient. For two centuries she had waited for this opportunity.

Julian let out a heavy sigh. He couldn’t put it off any longer. He was going to have to send the invitation after the sun rose. There was no use in holding off the inevitable. Not when the sense of doom was pressing in on him and Willow from all sides.

Willow lifted her head. “You can’t sleep?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Do you know what time it is?”

“I think it’s around three.”

“That late?”

He shrugged. “Or early, depending on how you think of it.”

“Sometimes I wish you and I could be stuck in the same day forever. Then we wouldn’t have to worry about her.”

“I know why you say that, but you don’t want to relive the same day over and over. It was like living in a nightmare. There were days I was sure I was going to go mad.”

“Why does Rose need eternal youth? Why can’t she just be content to live out her life like everyone else does?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the thought of death is too much for her to take.”

“Maybe. I don’t suppose it matters. She already made her bargain with the evil fairy. She brought a green fairy here to put us both under a curse. She must not care who she hurts as long as she gets what she wants.”

Julian caressed Willow’s cheek. “We have to believe we’ll get that wand to the fairy in the gazebo. We can’t be fatalistic. If we believe we’re doomed, then we’re already defeated.” He shifted so that he was facing her. “Rose isn’t the only one who has magic. We do, too. We

must remind ourselves of that. My grandfather brought the blue fairy here for our protection. He gave up this land and years of his life in order to help us."

"You're right. He sacrificed a lot for us. And your father had to live with the fact that he killed your uncle in that duel. That couldn't have been easy."

"It wasn't. My father tried to act as if everything was pleasant, but as I got older, I could tell he wasn't happy. I just didn't know why. As difficult as it is, we need to have faith in our ability to overcome this curse. We're not alone. We have help."

"I'll try to have faith."

He couldn't blame her for struggling to believe they were going to be all right. He would have to have enough faith for both of them. He brought his mouth to hers and kissed her. Being with her strengthened him. Even with the heaviness of the curse hovering over them, he felt much more hopeful about their future when they were together. He could use that closeness right now.

He took his time in making love to her, doing everything possible to give them both the most enjoyment from their time together. He let his hands trace all of her. He kissed parts of her he hadn't thought to kiss before.

After some time, he realized that she didn't seem so worried anymore. The spark that existed deep within her found its way to the surface. That was good. Even if it was for this moment, it was good that she had something to enjoy, something to get pleasure from. He waited until she was satisfied before he entered her. Then he took his time in completing the act.

Afterward, he experienced a peace that enabled him to believe that things would work out in their favor in the end. Good was going to win. He and Willow had a love match, and that had a power in itself. He couldn't think of anything finer than true love. Their love might be the very thing that was going to give him the strength to do whatever he had to in order to get that wand to the green fairy.

Feeling much better, he was finally able to drift off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Are you sure you want to do this with me?" Julian asked as he and Willow stood before the invisible barrier at the bridge.

Willow tucked the cloak closer around herself. Despite the fact that it was summer, the task ahead of them gave her a chill. Even the sun didn't warm her up. One might suggest that the wind cooled things off considerably, but, deep down, she knew it wasn't the wind that made her shiver.

She took a deep breath and released it. "Yes, I'm sure." She held her hand out to him.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "We're not alone. We have help."

She wished she had his faith. She tried to believe that everything was going to be all right. But no matter how hard she tried, there was a part of her that kept telling her she and Julian were no match for someone who had been using magic for over two centuries.

Julian, however, was right. They couldn't live their lives with the burden of this curse hanging over them. Nor could they allow their child, or children, to be in harm's way, should Rose make another deal with that evil fairy. This had to end, and it had to end with them.

She squeezed Julian's hand. "I'm ready. How do you want to send the missive?"

"I was thinking we'd place it on the ground and then push it over the barrier."

"All right."

They knelt on the bridge, and she waited as he took the rolled-up missive from his pocket. It had his seal on it. With a glance at her, he placed it in front of the barrier. They pushed the missive forward, and it went across the barrier without a hint of resistance.

He took her by the arm and urged her to move back as if he expected Rose to come through that very second. She put her arm around his waist, and he held her. They stood there for a couple of minutes, waiting for something to happen.

Except, nothing did. She could see the missive resting on the bridge. It remained untouched. Her gaze went to the path that marked the way to London. No one was on it. She scanned the area beyond the property. She didn't see anyone. She didn't even see any living creatures like a bird or a rabbit out there. Maybe that should have reassured her, but it only spooked her all the more.

"I suppose there's nothing to do but wait," Julian whispered. "We might as well do that inside."

Since she couldn't think of anything else to do, she nodded.

They went to their horses in silence. He gave her a kiss then helped her onto the sidesaddle. Despite her effort to be brave, her hands were shaking as she gathered the reins. She took another good look at the bridge.

Nothing.

Even the missive was still there.

Was it possible that Rose wasn't out there?

Julian turned his horse away from the bridge, and after a moment, she followed him. Halfway to the stables, he said, "When she comes, I think it'd be best if we stayed separated. I intend to get the wand from her and get it to the fairy. I don't want you to get involved. I want you to hide."

"But don't we both need to get the wand to that fairy?"

"I don't think so. The blue fairy blew magic on us. I think he did that so that we don't need to be together to find the green fairy."

"You're probably right, but what if you're not?"

"Then I'll see if I can get the cat or owl to help me find the cage. I don't need to see the fairy to give her the wand. I only need to know where the cage is."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him what he'd do if the cat and owl weren't around to help when he needed to get to the fairy, but she decided to let the question go. No matter how much they might plot and plan things out, there was no telling how things would go. Perhaps it was best not to waste their time talking about all of the things Rose might or might not do. She would probably be wise to make the most of the time she and Julian had before Rose arrived.

Julian and Willow spent the afternoon in the library. They were sitting together on the settee, and he had his arm around her while she was curled up next to him.

He thought reading to her would help take her mind off of Rose, but Willow's gaze kept going to the open window.

Julian put the book down. "Would you like me to close the window?"

Willow shook her head. "I like the fresh air."

Noting that her arm was cool to the touch, he said, "Would you like me to bring you a blanket?"

"No. Being with you is keeping me warm." She rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't know whether I want Rose to stay away forever or just come here and get this over with."

He preferred to just get it over with, but he did worry he wasn't going to be able to pull off the task of getting the wand to the green

fairy. He didn't dare tell Willow that. It would only worry her more, and she was worried enough as it was.

He kissed the top of her head and gave her shoulders an affectionate squeeze before he turned his attention back to the book. Just as he began to read where he left off, there was a knock at the door. Both he and Willow jumped off of the settee so fast that they bumped into each other.

"You have a visitor," the footman called out from the other side of the door.

Willow wrapped her arms around Julian's waist.

Julian put his arms around her and took a moment to gather his composure before asking, "Who is it?"

"Mr. Francis Azazel," the footman replied.

"It's all right," he told Willow. "It's my cousin."

Relieved, he took her hand and hurried to the door. He led Willow down to the entryway where the coachman set down a trunk next to a curly blond-haired, slender gentleman with the dark blue frock coat that Julian recalled helping him select when he was looking for something that would complement his wardrobe.

"Francis!" Julian released Willow and hugged his friend. "I didn't think I was ever going to see you again."

Francis returned his hug but let out a bewildered chuckle. "Your missive left me with some questions."

Julian let go of him. "It's a long story. But as it turns out you're all right. You came here, and you can see that I'm here with all of the servants."

The coachman and footman shot him a surprised look, but the coachman left and the footman shut the door.

Julian turned to the footman. "Have tea brought to the library and instruct a maid to get a room ready for my guest."

The footman nodded and hurried to do as instructed.

Julian slipped his arm around Willow and gestured to her. "This is my wife. She's Willow. I told Willow about you. I told her you're the greatest friend a gentleman ever had."

"You have a wife?" Francis asked, his eyes wide.

"I know I said I wasn't ready to get married when we last talked, but that all changed as soon as I met her." Julian smiled at her. "I had the vicar come out to marry us."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady," Francis greeted as he bowed to her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Willow replied.

Before Francis could notice that she didn't curtsy, and therefore wonder why not, Julian hurried to say, "While I am glad to see you, I'm wondering why you came when I warned you not to."

“That’s exactly why I came. You wrote for me not to come here, even if I never saw you again,” Francis told Julian. “You sounded like you were in a panic. I had to make sure you were all right.”

Julian might have been better off explaining why he’d warned him not to come. Then Francis would have really stayed away. With Rose bound to come, it wasn’t best for him to be here. But Julian hadn’t seen him in so long that having his friend here was like reaching an oasis in the desert.

“You have no idea how long I wanted to see you again,” Julian said. “It’s hard to believe this isn’t a dream.”

Francis chuckled. “It wasn’t that long ago you came here to bury your father.”

“I apologize. It’s just so good to see you and know that everything is going to be all right for you. You’ll get to marry Lady Kimberly, and you’ll have children and grandchildren.” He paused. He was only going to make his friend worry even more if he kept this up. “The important thing is that nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

Francis glanced at Willow as if to ask her what Julian was rambling on about, but Willow just offered him the same smile she’d given the vicar when she wasn’t sure of what to say.

“We should go to the library,” Julian said. “We’ll have tea, and then we’ll have dinner. Your timing is good. We’ll eat soon.”

“Then it’s a good thing I brought my appetite,” Francis replied.

“It is.” Julian put his free arm around his cousin’s shoulders and led him and Willow down the hall. “I have my two favorite people with me.” His gaze went to Willow. “When Francis marries Lady Kimberly, we’ll have dinner parties together. You’ll like Lady Kimberly. She’s a very sweet person.”

“Should I be worried that you hold my betrothed in such high esteem?” Francis asked in amusement.

“Of course not. I could never love anyone but Willow,” Julian replied. “She’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“I’d ask what kind of spell she cast over you to convince a confirmed bachelor to get married, but I suspect you were enchanted by her beauty.” With a look at Willow, he added, “You are a beautiful lady. Though, out of respect to my betrothed, I can’t say you’re more beautiful than she is.”

“Fortunately for me, I can say that,” Julian said as he winked at Willow. They reached the library, and he hurried on ahead of them so he could pour tea into their cups. “Francis, why don’t you sit in your favorite chair? Willow and I will sit on the settee.”

As Willow went to the settee, Francis glanced at the books. “My memory might be failing me, but I can’t help but wonder if your father always had this many books.”

“He never left the estate,” Julian said. “Reading was his way of seeing the world.” Julian set the teapot down then handed Willow a cup. After she accepted it, Julian picked up another cup and beckoned for Francis to go to the chair across from the settee. “Sit and relax. You had a long journey here.”

Francis hurried to the chair, accepted the cup, and sat down. “You two will have to tell me how you met. I know for a fact you didn’t meet in London.”

“No, we didn’t,” Julian said as he sat next to Willow.

He took a sip of his tea and thought over what he should tell Francis. It probably wasn’t best if he told Francis about the curse and the way Willow came here from the future. While he trusted Francis, it wasn’t fair to ask Francis to lie if someone inquired about Willow. Lady Kimberly, for one, would be curious since she also knew Julian had been reluctant to marry.

“I met Willow on my way here,” Julian finally decided to say. “Her carriage was broken down, and I stopped to help her. I could go into detail, but it would only bore you.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I’d find the story fascinating,” Francis replied then took a sip of his tea.

Julian should have expected his cousin to say that, especially since his cousin liked details. “Really, there’s nothing to tell. Willow and I met, and I was attracted to her right away.”

“I was attracted to you, too,” Willow spoke up.

Julian glanced her way and smiled. It was nice to know the immediate attraction hadn’t been one-sided.

“What was it about the other that attracted you both?” Francis asked.

Julian gestured to her. “You can see for yourself how lovely she is to look at.”

Francis smirked. “Isn’t it just like a gentleman to be focused on a lady’s beauty upon meeting her?” He directed his gaze to Willow. “Was the same true for you? Were you attracted to how handsome he is?”

Willow’s face grew pink. “I did find him handsome, but I was drawn to his kindness. He wasn’t given to vanity or pride like I thought a wealthy gentleman might be.”

“There are plenty of gentlemen who are vain and proud regardless of wealth or title,” Francis said. “I’ve met plenty of them over the years. One might wonder why a lady would marry at all.” He glanced at Julian. “It’s good for us that they do anyway.”

Julian’s eyebrows furrowed. He didn’t recall Francis ever saying he’d met plenty of gentlemen who were vain or proud. But it had been two centuries since Julian had talked with Francis. It could very well

be that Francis had joked about it in the past and Julian didn't remember it.

There was a knock at the door. Julian excused himself and went to answer it.

"Dinner is ready, my lord," the butler told him.

"We'll be there in a moment," Julian replied.

When Julian returned to Willow and Francis, Francis was saying, "I'm glad that you and my cousin are together. I'm only sorry I missed the wedding."

"We only had the vicar here," Willow said.

Julian placed his hand on Willow's shoulder and then told her and Francis that it was time to eat. "I didn't plan the menu, but it turns out we're having your favorite dish this evening."

Francis rose to his feet. "I've been on my way here for so long that I'll eat anything."

Julian helped Willow up and placed her hand on his arm. "Remember when we used to play that hiding game when your family came for visits?" Julian asked his friend as they left the room.

Francis chuckled. "How could I forget? Children have to find ways to amuse themselves."

"I haven't forgotten how you were hiding under the desk when my father sat behind it." Julian turned his gaze to Willow. "He was there for nearly ten minutes before my father felt him with his foot. My father was so shocked that his scream could be heard across most of the manor. That's how I ended up finding him."

Willow laughed. "That is funny."

"At least you finally found me," Francis said.

"After twenty minutes of looking." Julian shook his head. "And to think that the hiding place was such a simple one."

"The simplest things are often the easiest to miss," Francis replied.

"Well, I never made the mistake of not looking under any desks again," Julian said.

Francis winked at him. "I suppose it's lucky for me that I know plenty of hiding places."

"Yes, I suppose you'll give your children ideas on where they can hide when our children play the game someday."

The three entered the dining room, and the conversation turned to the meal. Despite his warning to Francis to stay away, Julian was glad he was here. Waiting to see if Rose would come provided him and Willow with a lot to worry about. Francis' arrival was a much-needed reprieve from all of that. For now, at least, they could rest, and the rest would do them both a lot of good.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After dinner, Julian encouraged Willow to go to bed so that she could get some sleep. The past few days had been hard on both of them, and he figured that, between the two of them, she'd been under the most strain. He watched her as she went down the hall that led to the stairs. The red and gold thread connecting them glimmered along the floor.

When she was out of sight, he followed Francis into the library. The maid finished lighting candles since it was now dark out. Julian waited until she was gone before he shut the door.

"You really love Willow," Francis said.

"I do. I know I haven't known her for as long as you've known Lady Kimberly, but I think when you find the right lady, you know she's the one."

"It's hard to argue with that." Francis gestured to the decanter. "Would it be all right if I poured us both a drink?"

Julian nodded and went to sit in a chair. "You have no idea what I've been through since leaving London. So much has happened. I'm not even sure if I can tell you about it or not. I know we're used to telling each other everything."

"If we're used to telling each other everything, why not just tell me?"

"Because you'd think I was mad if I did."

Francis went over to him and held out the glass of brandy to him. "I'm sure we're all a little mad."

Julian accepted the glass but didn't drink from it. "What I've been through is too wild of a tale. You're a gentleman of science." He put the glass on the table and turned to his cousin as his cousin sat across from him. "You've always believed that for something to be true, it has to be explained through logic." He took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. "There's nothing logical about anything that's happened here."

"You married Willow. You're in love. Does the rest matter?"

If only Francis knew about the curse and fairies…

Julian was ready to ask him how things were in London when he noticed something glowing under his cousin's frock coat. Sure he was imagining it, he blinked and looked at the frock coat again.

He wasn't imagining it. There was a faint outline of a thin, small object sending off a blue and green glow. Considering how thick the material of the frock coat was, Julian was surprised the glow was showing at all.

There was only one person Julian could think of who would have something like that in a pocket, and he doubted it was Francis. His

gaze went to the brandy the intruder had given him. Was there only brandy in that glass? Perhaps the person put something in it to make him sleep. Or perhaps there was some enchantment put over it to make him unable to react if danger were to suddenly come upon him.

His gaze went to the face of the intruder who looked exactly like Francis. Only magic could accomplish such a feat. Julian forced himself to remain still. It wouldn't be wise to let Rose know he knew the truth. The best option would be to get the glowing blue and green object. That thing had to be the wand. He didn't know why he hadn't seen it before, but he was seeing it now. That had to be the blue fairy's doing. He had asked how he would know where the wand was when Rose finally came.

Julian swallowed the lump in his throat. Willow was upstairs. Why did Rose let her go up there? Wouldn't it have been easier to strike as soon as she arrived? Why put on a pretense of being his cousin?

He glanced at the red and gold thread that was glimmering between him and Willow. They had some kind of magic between them. Was it possible that Rose needed to get them separated in order to act?

Yes, that had to be it. The magic in the wand was powerful, but Julian suspected that magic between two people was more powerful than magic possessed by only one.

"Go on and tell me what's on your mind," Rose said. "I can tell something is bothering you."

Julian couldn't believe how much she looked and sounded just like his cousin. He hesitated to respond. What would be a good way to get that wand? As it was, she was across from him. He couldn't just lunge at her to get it while she was looking at him. He had to be more subtle than that.

"I have an idea," Julian said as he stood up. "Why don't we play a game of chess?"

She frowned. "Chess? I didn't come all the way from London to play a game of chess."

"We can talk while we play. I can tell you all about the things that have happened since I left London. There's a lot I didn't say before. I wasn't sure if Willow wanted me to tell you." Hoping it would prompt her to agree, he added, "The story is hard to believe."

She tapped her fingers on the glass of brandy she was holding and glanced at the chessboard that was against the wall. "All right. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to play the game." She pointed to Julian's glass. "Bring it along. If it's as good as you make it sound, I think we could both use a drink."

Hoping she didn't notice the way his hand trembled, Julian picked up his glass. He gestured for her to go first. "I'll follow you."

She offered a nod and headed for the chessboard.

Julian put the glass back down. He took a deep breath then leapt for her.

She spun around and drew out the wand before he got the chance to reach her. He froze in midair.

She threw her glass down. Then, her appearance changed. Instead of looking like Francis, she turned into a blonde lady who seemed to be in her forties, and she had on a pink gown.

"Don't bother explaining anything to me," she said. "I know that blue fairy your grandfather hid somewhere on this property made sure you learned all about me and why you and Willow are here."

Before he could respond, she waved the wand, and he went flying through the air. The room blurred around him until his body slammed into the wall. Before he had time to move, glowing pink and purple bands formed around his wrists and ankles so that he was pinned in place. It took him a moment to realize he was hanging on the wall right under the ceiling. He tried to pry the bands off the wall, but they remained firmly in place. He did the same with his ankles, and they didn't budge, either.

Rose walked over to him and clucked her tongue. "I expected more of a fight from you. Of the two of you, I thought for sure Willow was going to be the easier one to catch. You, after all, had two centuries to prepare for my arrival."

He moved one of his wrists to see if he could get it to slip out of the band, but it was no use.

"It's useless to try to get out of those," Rose said. "They're enchanted. You need magic to get out of them, and unfortunately for you, I have the wand."

She twirled the wand around, and a swirl of green dust glowed in the air. It dissipated as soon as she stopped swirling the wand.

Julian clenched his teeth. How could he have been so careless? He should have known better than to run right for the wand. He should have let her go on thinking he believed she was Francis until he could get close enough to grab the wand from the pocket.

Now he'd just put him and Willow in great danger. He made another attempt to free his hands and feet, but it did no good. He wasn't going anywhere. He couldn't believe it. If Willow didn't hide, she was going to be next. He glanced at the red and gold thread connecting him and Willow. It went from him and slipped under the door. He glanced at Rose. Did she see it?

"I am not an unreasonable lady," Rose said, directing his attention back to her. "I can offer you a deal. I can release you from those bands. You can go free."

Julian glanced at the thread. Rose didn't see it. Only he could. He

didn't know exactly what he could do with it, but anything would be better than nothing. He focused on Willow and willed for her to wake up. The thread glowed brighter. Encouraged, he sent the thought that Rose was here and that Rose was going to search for her.

"Droch Leteacht didn't say I had to take you, specifically," Rose continued. "He said I had to bring him two living souls who are heirs of this estate. I need one who belongs to this time and one who ends the family line. Willow is the last heir. But," she gave him a meaningful look, "there are two who rightfully exist in this time. You can make a trade. You don't have to go to Droch Leteacht. He is a powerful fairy, but he's also very terrible. He lives among the remains of those who've died violent deaths. He delights in the pain of the living. He'll keep you alive for centuries while he slowly dines on you. He and his companions will eat you until you're about to die and then restore you only to start eating you again. You can't tell me that is a fate you're willing to share, not even with the lady you love."

She lifted the wand and aimed it at him.

He closed his eyes right before the pink and purple blast hit him.

At once, he saw a land void of vegetation. It was a graveyard of dug-up graves. There were human bones as far as he could see. The clouds above threatened rain that never came. There was not a trace of sunlight anywhere. Everything was shrouded in a gray color. In the center of this dreadful graveyard were a group of black fairies who were snickering and hollering. They drank the blood of their human victims and feasted on them while the humans wailed.

Julian cried out and struggled to get out of the bands in earnest.

"I told you he's terrible," Rose said and released him from the vision.

Julian opened his eyes. He'd never been so relieved to be in this manor. "Why would you seek out a fairy like that?"

"He's the only one who has the ability to give eternal youth," Rose said.

Though Julian was looking around the library, a part of him felt like he was still in that awful graveyard that spanned in all directions as far as the eye could see. He shivered.

"Now you understand why you don't want to go there," she continued. "He can keep you like that for hundreds, even a thousand years. Thanks to your time with Willow, you don't have to go there. I only need two heirs. One is the last heir of this estate. The other is an heir who belongs to the first part of this century. That heir doesn't have to be you. You don't know it yet, but Willow carries a male child. That child can take your place. Droch Leteacht will be so pleased with a baby, especially one born in his kingdom, that he might even grant you eternal youth. Babies are the most precious

things to fairies. You can be free forever from this curse. Marry another lady. Have children with her. Let your family line expand. Let the title survive. I've had many lovers over the centuries. Trust me. One is as good as another. You don't need Willow. As for children, they're easy to create, especially when one is a gentleman. All you have to do is say the word. Agree to the trade, and Willow will be forced to come to me. I won't even have to look for her."

"No!" One lady wasn't as good as another, and no one could replace a child. Julian struggled harder to get out of the bands. *Willow, run. Hide. Get out of here! Rose is coming!* The red and gold thread grew brighter. He prayed that meant Willow was receiving his message.

"This is nonsense," Rose said. "Why would you allow yourself to be feasted upon for centuries if you don't have to? I would think after two centuries trapped in a curse, you'd be wiser than this!"

"It's because I have been trapped in a curse for two centuries that I've learned the value of love. You are a repugnant and loathsome creature," he snapped. "It's no wonder my grandfather married someone else to be rid of you. I'd rather die than do anything you want."

He barely got the last word out before she sent a blast of magic his way that made him feel as if he'd just been slammed against the wall again. She held the magic up against him, and though he tried to breathe, the pressure of the magic was so great that he couldn't take any air into his lungs.

She finally let the magic go and snarled at him. "Unfortunately, I need to send you to Droch Leteacht alive." With a grunt, she headed out of the library.

Willow was in a deep sleep when she felt a surge of panic wake her up. She bolted up in the bed and saw that the red and gold thread connecting her and Julian was glowing brightly in front of her.

"Julian?" she asked.

She expected him to be in the bedchamber, but she didn't see him anywhere. She jumped out of the bed and saw that the thread was going under the door.

Something was wrong. She couldn't quite figure out what it was except that Julian was frightened. No. Not frightened. It was stronger than that. He was terrified.

Rose had to be here. That was the only explanation for it. Willow hurried to slip on a gown and her slippers. Then she softly opened the door and listened. All was quiet. Then she heard the sound of

footsteps from downstairs. Angry footsteps.

The red and gold thread went down the hall and down the main stairs. Julian was down in that direction, but the footsteps seemed to be coming from that area, too.

What if Rose was coming for her? What if Rose was coming up here to these bedchambers?

Where could she go to avoid her? She had no idea what happened to Julian, but she did know that Rose needed both of them in order to send them to that evil fairy. As long as Rose didn't get her, there was a chance she and Julian would be all right.

Willow hurried down the hall toward the attic, but then a memory flashed through her mind. A memory of another time. Someone was telling her about the servant stairs that were up here. *There are other stairs up here, but those have been boarded up. Servants used to go up and down them. If the new owner wants, they can always open those stairwells back up.*

She softly ran down the hall in the direction of those stairs. What she needed was a way to the lower level, and that would take her there. Fortunately, she found the stairs. Just as she slipped into the stairwell, she caught sight of a lady in a pink gown coming up the main stairs. Willow gasped and softly closed the door behind her. Then she made her way down the dark stairwell. The red and gold thread helped to guide her down the steps so she didn't trip.

When she made it to the other door, she opened it a crack and saw a corridor lined with rooms. She rushed past all of them. There were two servants she passed, but they seemed to be in a deep sleep since they didn't wake up as she hurried past them. She followed the red and gold thread through the halls until she recognized the hall leading to the library.

She made it to the library and let out a startled cry when she saw Julian hanging high on the wall by bands that glowed pink and purple. She couldn't tell if he was alive or dead since his eyes were closed and he wasn't making any sounds.

She picked up a chair and set it in front of him.

"Julian," she whispered as she stood up on the chair.

She reached for his bands at his ankles. A red color wove around the bands, and the bands fell off of his ankles. Inspired, she stood on her tiptoes and touched his face, hoping she could wake him up. It worked. At once, he opened his eyes and focused on her.

"Willow?" he asked.

"We have to get you down from here," she whispered.

"Rose is here. You can't let her find you."

"We need the wand, Julian." She reached up as high as she could, but she couldn't reach the bands holding his wrists in place. She tried

shaking his arms in hopes that would do it, but all she managed to do was loosen them from the wall. “I can’t reach your wrists.”

“She’s looking for you, Willow,” he whispered. “You can’t let her find you. Please. I’ll try to get out of here to get the wand. I need you to hide.”

She shook his arms with greater force, but the bands still wouldn’t drop from his wrists.

Something flew past her and landed on Julian’s hand. It took Willow a moment to realize it was the owl. It hooted at her.

Then she heard a cat meow. Her gaze went to the window, and the cat was sitting on the open window sill. It meowed at her again and then moved its paw in a motion that let her know it wanted her to get out of the manor.

“Go with it,” Julian whispered.

“Not without you,” Willow whispered back and tried, once more, without success, to free him of the bands at his wrists. “I can’t lose you.”

“She needs both of us. As long as she doesn’t get you, she can’t take me.”

He was right. The evil fairy wanted both of them. She heard a high-pitch scream from upstairs that sent waves of pink and purple ripples through the air.

“Hurry up,” Julian pleaded with her. “Get out of here.”

Willow groaned in frustration and headed for the window. The cat jumped outside, and with one last look at Julian, Willow followed it. Willow barely managed to land on her feet. She heard someone heading for the library, so she stooped down to avoid being seen.

“Where is she?” Rose demanded.

“I don’t know,” Julian replied.

“What do you mean you don’t know? I can see she released you from some of your bands!”

The owl let out a hoot, and Rose let out a shriek.

Willow was tempted to look in through the window and find out what was going on, but the cat pricked her with its claws to get her attention. Startled, she turned her attention to the fresh wound on her arm. The cat let out an impatient meow and darted over to Julian’s father’s horse. The horse was standing a few windows away from her. It moved its head as if summoning her to go to it.

She quickly made her way to it. The horse got on its knees, and the cat jumped on top of his back. It let out a meow and then jumped off.

She heard Rose scream before she saw a flash of pink and purple colors hit a tree not too far from the library window. The tree lit up with pink and purple flames, then quickly dried up and withered into ash. The wind carried the ashes away.

Willow sharply inhaled and then hopped on the horse, doing her best to imitate sitting on a sidesaddle. The horse got up on its feet and then, without warning, went into a full gallop. Willow clung to its neck and concentrated on keeping her balance.

A flash of pink and purple came right by her, but the horse dodged it. She was jerked to the side but managed to tighten her hold on the horse before she fell off. Another flash came to her other side, and the horse, once more, avoided it.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't keep watching this. At any moment, the horse under her could be burned up just like that tree, and then she'd be bound with bands on her wrists and ankles just like Julian had been. Then there would be no hope for her and Julian. She kept her eyes shut tight as the horse continued to take her to safety.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The owl came in through the window after chasing Rose out of the room. Julian had managed to free himself from one of the bands holding his wrist up to the wall. He was in the process of trying to get his other wrist free.

The owl returned to him and started pecking at the band. Julian used his feet to push against the wall. The room smelled of smoked wood and papers. In her effort to wave the owl away from her, Rose had sent blasts of magic fire all around the room. It was a wonder none of them hit Julian. It was also a wonder that none of the servants had come into the room to see what was going on. His guess was that Rose had put them under a deep sleep so they'd stay out of the way.

Julian gave a hard yank against the band, and it finally released him. He fell onto the chair and knocked it over as he tumbled to the floor. It took a couple of seconds for him to get to his feet, but once he did, he ran to the window.

He saw that Rose was using her wand to shoot more of those fiery blasts at something in the distance. Julian saw a horse galloping toward the section of trees on the property that led to the blue fairy. The horse dodged the blasts as fast as she was sending them. He thought he saw someone riding the horse, but it wasn't until he noticed the red and gold thread that he realized the horse was taking Willow to the blue fairy. What a relief. He couldn't think of a better hiding place than the enchanted trees.

Julian slipped outside, doing his best to be quiet so that Rose didn't notice him.

Julian heard a caterwaul that echoed loudly through the night from behind Rose. Rose spun around, and that was when Julian saw the cat from the barn. She pointed her wand at it, but it was already bolting for the nearest tree.

The owl swept in from behind her and tangled its claws into her hair. She let out a shriek and brought her hands up to grab the owl.

Seeing his opportunity, Julian ran for her. She managed to pry the owl off of her head and threw the animal to the ground. Julian bumped into her before she had a chance to point the wand at the owl.

She shoved Julian away, but he pushed back as he reached for the wand in her hand. She swiped the wand across his chest, resulting in a welt that burned into his skin through his waistcoat and shirt. He stumbled away from her for a second but quickly regained his ground as he pushed the pain aside. He had to get the wand! Everything he cared about depended on it.

A mouse ran up his leg, but he kept his focus on the wand. He gripped Rose's wrist in his hand. She used her free hand to swipe at his face, but he blocked the attack with his free arm. Another mouse ran up his other leg. Rose let out a frustrated cry.

Above them the owl hooted and circled above them. More mice came at Julian and Rose. Julian glanced at the ground, and the entire ground seemed to be covered with mice. And those mice were starting to climb all over Julian and Rose.

"No," Rose growled. "No!"

Sparks of pinks, purples, and gold shot out from the wand and lit up the night sky above them.

Julian tightened his grip on her wrist so she couldn't move the wand. Then he finally secured her other hand so she couldn't lash out at him anymore. She kicked at him, but the mice were quickly forming a barrier between the two of them so he could barely feel the impact of the kick.

Julian finally managed to get her to release the wand as the mice ran up their arms. He tried to grab it, but it fell on the ground and got lost in the sea of mice that were swarming all around them.

The cat let out a shrill howling noise, and the mice jumped off of Julian and leapt at Rose. That freed Julian to search beneath the mice for the wand. He got on his hands and knees and scrambled to find it.

A faint blue light winked at him. He turned toward it, and with one accord, the mice cleared a spot in the grass. The wand gave out a green pulsing color. Julian dropped to his knees and snatched it up.

Rose tried to get to him, but the mice pressed in on her and forced her to the ground. She threw them off of her, but the more she threw off, the more scrambled to get on her.

Julian jumped up and rushed for the gazebo. He hoped he wouldn't need Willow to get the wand to the green fairy, but at the moment, he was the only one who could get to her.

The owl and cat stayed with Rose, letting out their hoots and their yowls. He had no idea what Rose had put them through while they were men, but he suspected it wasn't pleasant since they were so angry with her that they had summoned all of the mice to go after her.

By the time Julian reached the gazebo, he was out of breath and starting to stumble from the exertion of running. He glanced behind him. Rose wasn't following him.

He turned his attention back to the gazebo and entered it. A blue light glimmered on the bench. He went to it and held the wand out.

A small hand reached through the invisible covering, and he placed the wand in the fairy's hand. At once, the cage shattered. Julian jerked back and fell to the floor of the gazebo.

The green fairy emerged from her hidden spot and went over to Julian. Though Julian knew he hadn't done anything to hurt her, he was too scared to say anything. She waved the wand in the air. In the swirl of green dust, a missive formed. It rolled up on its own accord and was given a green seal. It floated in mid-air in front of him, but he was too frightened to take it. She offered him a nod and then flew out of the gazebo and into the air.

He crawled to the edge of the gazebo so he could watch her. She flew high into the air then lifted her wand. At once, the sky became a green color that was so bright, it was if it was noon during a sunny day. Julian squinted against it so he could see where Rose was. He saw her in the center of where the mice were congregating. They covered her from head to toe, and though she tried to fling them off of her, there were too many of them for her to succeed.

The fairy let out a cry with such a high pitch that Julian had to cover his ears. Rose and the mice grew still. The fairy pointed her wand straight at Rose. The mice leapt off of Rose and fled in all directions to hide. The cat and owl hurried for the stables.

Just as Julian thought it might be wise to move further into the gazebo, the ground shook with such violence that he ended up rolling up against one of the benches. He clung to it in order to steady himself.

Dark clouds began to form in the sky above, and thunder boomed from multiple directions.

Rose stared at something above her. Julian shifted so he could see what had caught her attention. The clouds continued rolling in and a tornado began to take shape in the sky.

Rose screamed and ran.

Julian turned his attention back to the sky. No, it wasn't a tornado that was forming above them. It was something else. He moved to get a better look at the funnel that was coming down from the dark clouds that filled the sky. Black wings flapped in the air in a circular formation.

Fairies. Dark, evil fairies. They were forming the funnel. Julian hid under a bench and grasped its legs to brace himself for whatever was coming.

These were not the benevolent creatures Julian and Willow had dealt with. No, these were the things of nightmares.

The fairies continued to swirl down from the sky until the entire sky turned dark from the clouds. The entire estate was cast into shadows. All color departed. Even the green fairy didn't give off her glow.

More thunder boomed, and this time lightning shot from the center of the swirling fairies. The lightning hit Rose, and she was unable to

keep running. The lightning snaked around her and lifted her into the air.

She screamed again and tried to get out of the lightning, but it seemed to only tighten around her. Another dark fairy, this one larger than the others and far more terrifying emerged from the center where the fairies spun around. It had sharp talons on the end of its wings. It had sharp teeth and sharp nails. Its eyes were flames of fire.

Droch Leteacht. Julian recognized the evil fairy from the vision Rose had given him. It was far more terrible in real life than in a vision.

The air grew so thick and heavy that Julian couldn't breathe.

Droch Leteacht snarled at Rose. "You're mine."

Rose shook her head. "No, no. Please. Willow is with child. I can get that child to you. Or you can take her yourself. She's over there in those trees."

Julian tried to call out that he wasn't going to allow it, but he still couldn't breathe. And because of that, he couldn't talk. He rolled out from under the bench and tried to pull himself up, but the air was so heavy that he collapsed back to the floor.

"You've tried my patience one too many times," Droch Leteacht growled at Rose.

Lightning shot forth from his fingers and shackles twisted around Rose's neck, wrists, and ankles. Rose cried out and fought against them, but he grabbed the chain around her neck and yanked her with him. The two went into the middle of the swirling fairies.

The dark fairies snickered and cackled as they followed him back into the sky. The thunder boomed again, but this time it sounded like it came from further away.

The heavy feeling pressing down on Julian left, and he could finally breathe. The dark fairies headed off into the horizon, and the colors began to return to the estate.

The green fairy, looking satisfied, departed in a different direction. And then the sky returned to its nighttime appearance, and all was quiet.

It took a few minutes before Julian had the strength to get to his feet.

It was over. Rose was gone. She couldn't harm him or Willow ever again. And…and…a child? Did he even believe her? For all he knew, she could have been lying.

Regardless, he had to get to Willow. As he made his way to the doorway of the gazebo, he remembered the missive from the green fairy. He found it floating in mid-air, still covered in green light.

Despite his hesitation, he took it, and the green glow left it. The green seal broke and crumpled into dust that blew away in a breeze.

He walked out of the gazebo and unrolled it. In the moonlight, he read, *Because you freed me, your title will be passed on from one generation to the next for all time.*

Just as he thought he would show it to Willow, it turned to dust and blew away in another breeze. He stared after the green dust as it disappeared into the night.

He released his breath. It was enough to know everything was going to be all right. He and Willow wouldn't be taken to that cursed land of the evil fairies. They would be allowed to live on at this estate in peace.

He found the red and gold thread leading to the place where the blue fairy dwelt and headed for Willow.

The air was silent inside the group of trees which vibrated with a soothing blue color that formed a barrier to keep malevolent magic out. Unlike her first time here, Willow didn't feel strange. Everything felt as normal in here as it did out there. She was sure that was significant, but she had no way of knowing how. Perhaps the blue fairy wasn't trying to mask his dwelling. Maybe he was allowing anyone, or anything, to see his location on the property right now.

Willow stood close to the horse and waited in the trees. The horse remained here, and she took that to mean it wasn't safe to leave yet. The terrible dark clouds and those awful fairies were gone. All that was left beyond the trees, as far as she could make out, was a peaceful night.

She couldn't make out the manor or gazebo from where she was. All she knew was that something had changed. As the dark clouds departed, a wave of green light swept through the area. It even passed through the blue barrier. She hoped the green light meant the green fairy was free. If so, then it would mean Julian had succeeded and Rose was no longer a threat.

She heard the sound of fluttering wings and turned in time to see the blue fairy come up to her. He pointed his wand toward something in the distance, and that was when she realized someone was running toward them. Her initial reaction was to lean into the horse, but then she saw the red and gold thread connecting her to the person and knew it was Julian.

She was ready to run out to him when the fairy pointed his wand in Julian's direction. Julian disappeared for a second but reappeared right in front of her. Willow gasped and hugged him. He was all right!

He hugged her in return. "I gave the green fairy her wand. She's free now. Rose is gone, too. The evil fairy took her away. We're safe

now. It's going to be all right."

She was so relieved that she might have collapsed if he hadn't been holding her.

The blue fairy approached them, and they turned to him. The fairy waved his wand until blue dust formed in front of them. The dust turned into a parchment with words that began to form on it. The parchment floated in front of them, and the fairy looked at them expectantly.

"You take it," she whispered to Julian. While she understood the fairy was here to protect them, she wasn't sure she wanted to touch anything magical.

Julian took it and read, "'The curse has been lifted. All of the effects will be removed with it. Remember the deal I had with your grandfather. The land belongs to me for all generations, but your lineage will be allowed to live here. I will stay here in the trees that will be invisible to all who look at it.'" Julian glanced at Willow. "That sounds fair to me."

Willow nodded her agreement. It was much better than being enslaved to an evil fairy for hundreds—possibly a thousand or so—years.

"I understand," Julian told the fairy. "The land is yours and will stay yours. Thank—"

Willow stopped him. "Don't thank him."

Julian's gaze went to her. "Why not?"

"The books I read warn against it. They are polite, but they don't like to be thanked."

"Oh, all right." Julian's gaze went back to the fairy.

The fairy smiled and then twirled his wand. A swirl of blue light spun around the wand. As it grew brighter, Julian held Willow closer to him, and she braced herself for what was coming next.

The fairy pointed his wand at Julian and Willow, and the light swept over them. Then the light swept over the horse and continued to sweep across the property.

The fairy offered a bow and waved. Then it disappeared, and in the next instance, Willow, Julian, and the horse were out of the trees. The trees began to blur together and then slowly disappeared. Willow's eyes widened.

"Do you see trees?" she whispered to Julian.

"No," he whispered back.

They stood there for a few long moments before they noticed that the horse was wandering off.

"The stables are over here," Willow said as she followed it.

When she reached it, it stopped and looked at her, but the awareness that had once been in its eyes was gone. She rubbed its

nose, and it snorted as any other horse would. She looked up at its mane and noticed the white streak was gone from it. Now its mane was all black.

"I think what made it human in the future is gone," she told Julian. "It seems to be different now."

Julian studied it. "I think you're right. And there's something else that's different. The red and gold thread between us is no longer there."

He took a few steps away from her, and she blinked in surprise. He was right. There was nothing between them anymore.

"Do you think all of the magic is gone from this place?" Willow asked.

"Well, no. There is magic where the fairy is." Julian pointed to the invisible trees. "That will always be here. But it could be that all other traces of the magic will be gone. Do you remember anything about moving stairs from your time?"

"Moving what?"

"Cars?"

"What's a car?"

"I suppose not all of the magic is gone," he said. "There's enough left so you can be with me in this time."

The night had been a long one, and she was exhausted. She put her arm around his waist. What did she care about the strange things she had told him about from her time? It didn't matter. What mattered was that they were together.

Julian gave her a kiss then they led the horse to the stables. He put the horse in its stall. On their way out, a black cat ran by them.

"The cat!" Willow pointed to it. "Do you think it's like the horse now?"

Julian hurried after it and picked it up. Its eyes were no longer a bright green color, though they were still green. It meowed at them and wiggled to get out of his arms. It then darted up into the loft, and, if Willow saw right, the owl was in the shadows. It gave no hoot to acknowledge it recognized them.

Julian gasped and ran over to her. "I wonder if we can cross the bridge."

"You want to check the bridge this late at night?" Willow asked.

"I can saddle my horse. We can use the double saddle and ride together."

"But I'm not in my riding outfit. Shouldn't we at least change first?"

They heard a sound and jumped.

The stablemaster came into the stables and rubbed his eyes as if he'd just woken up from a deep sleep.

“My lord and lady!” the stablemaster exclaimed in surprise when he noticed them. “I didn’t know you were out here this late. Is there something you need me to do? Is a horse sick?”

“No, the horses are fine,” Julian replied. After a moment, he added, “Thankfully. I wasn’t sure about one of them and wished to check on it.” He glanced over at the horse that had belonged to his father. “As it turns out, I worried for nothing. You may go.”

The stablemaster offered a nod and left.

Julian turned to her. “Whatever Rose did to put them to sleep seems to have worn off.” He put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her. “We have so much to be thankful for. Whether we can leave this property or not, I’m just glad we’ll be together.”

She wrapped her arm around his waist and leaned into him. “I am, too.”

In silence, they returned to the manor.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Despite the long night, Julian woke up just past dawn. There had been a moment as he'd been hanging on the wall by those bands when he'd doubted he was going to ever wake up in this manor again. Everything had happened so fast that, even now, he had trouble sorting it all out. All he could do was give Willow an overall version of what had happened. The details were just too unreal to adequately explain.

Maybe it was for the best that he couldn't put to words all he'd witnessed. What if he let something slip that made someone think he was losing his mind? He'd rather not have someone question his sanity like his mother had questioned his father's sanity and almost had him committed to an asylum.

Julian's attention went to Willow. One thing he did remember with clarity was Rose telling him Willow was with child. He got up on his side and noticed that she was awake.

"Last night wasn't a dream, was it?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't a dream. It really happened." He pulled her into his arms. "Rose won't be coming back. The evil fairy took her."

He did recall that horrifying creature with surprising clarity. He also recalled the vision Rose had given him of the kingdom that fairy ruled. That monster was the thing of nightmares. And it was something he'd rather never tell Willow about. Some things were just too dark and too terrible. He forced his mind off of those things.

He brushed Willow's hair from her face. "If I've learned nothing else in these two centuries, I've learned to not tamper with things I can't handle. The magic of the fairies is too much for humans. I'm grateful to the blue fairy for helping us, but I'll be fine if I never see him or any other fairy for as long as I live."

"I agree with you. I've learned that it's better to grow old and die than to make a deal with a fairy. I can't imagine trading my child for eternal youth."

"I can't, either." He paused then asked, "Willow, do you know if you're carrying a child right now?"

"No." Her eyebrows furrowed, and she glanced at the ceiling. "I won't know for about another week. Why? Are you that eager to have a son?"

He smiled. "It would be nice to have a child or two running through this place. It's been quiet here for far too long. But that's not why I asked. I asked because Rose said you were with child."

"I'm not as far as I know. I did have my lady's time shortly before I came to be with you in this century."

He couldn't recall any mention of a lady's time from any conversations he'd had in the past, but Willow was a lady who had to deal with them. Obviously, she knew what to expect. He would wait for next week to ask her about a child. As she said, she would know then.

She put her arms around his shoulders. "If you'd like to try for a child right now, I certainly wouldn't mind."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to try for one, just to better my chances that you'll be giving me good news next week." He smiled then brought his lips to hers and made love to her.

Right after breakfast, Willow and Julian went to the stables, and while the stablemaster saddled their horses, they gave a couple of apples to the horse that had kept her safe while Julian fought Rose for the wand. It was sad that the horse, cat, and owl didn't remember her and Julian, but she surmised that if things were to be normal, this had to happen. Still, she vowed to come out here on a regular basis to give the animals a special treat for all they had done to help her and Julian.

"You're a good horse," Willow whispered as she stroked its mane.

She glanced at the corner of the barn where the cat and owl were eating small portions of cooked turkey Julian had requested the cook to make. Though the cook had been surprised to learn they wanted turkey so early in the day, he had made it, and she and Julian brought it to the stables. The stablemaster had given them a look of surprise, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

Once the horses were ready, she and Julian rode down to the bridge. Just in case they would be unable to go across it, they got off of their horses and walked the animals with them to the bridge.

"Are you ready?" Julian asked her.

Willow glanced at him, took a deep breath, and nodded. With one accord, they put their hands forward. Willow waited for any sign of resistance, but it never came. There was no tingling sensation. There was no invisible barrier. There were no colors that rippled in the air. Even the moat looked like it was untouched by magic.

Julian took a tentative step forward, and when nothing happened, he smiled at her. "It's all right. We can cross."

Encouraged, she followed him. Nothing happened to her, either. They proceeded across the entire bridge, and once they were on the other side, they got back on their horses.

"It's been so long since I've been beyond the bridge," Julian said, not hiding his excitement. "Do you know what this means? We can go

to London. I can't wait to show you London. We'll see plays at the theatre, dance at balls, and take walks at Hyde Park. I'll introduce you to the people I know. We'll have dinner parties. There's so much to do. You're going to love it."

She had brief recollections of seeing a play or two, dancing, and walking at parks in her time, but they were like fleeting thoughts that refused to form into anything she could hold onto. As for dinner parties, she was certain she'd never been to any. There was much for her to learn. She was going to have a lot to do in order to fully adjust to this life.

Despite feeling overwhelmed, she was looking forward to it. Julian would be with her. She wasn't going to have to do these things alone. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected she'd done a lot of things alone in her time. It would be nice such wouldn't be the case anymore.

"Tell me about London," she said. "What is it like there?"

As he explained it to her, she rode next to him in silence. They went down the path between the young trees. She couldn't be sure, but she thought a flicker of a memory came to her. In it, trees towered above her and their branches formed a covering like a canopy. As soon as the image came, it was gone.

Their path came to an end at a wider path that had seen years of use by carriages. Along the path were a few large bushes, and behind one of the bushes, she heard a muffled sound. At first, she thought she had imagined it, but when Julian turned his gaze in the direction of one of the bushes, she knew it was real. It wasn't some fragment of a memory from her past.

"Stay here," Julian told her then led his horse into a trot over to the bush.

She watched as he rounded the corner of the bush.

"Wh—What are you doing here?" Julian asked in a mixture of shock and alarm. Julian hurried to get down from the horse.

She urged her horse to go over to Julian so she could see what was going on. When she reached the bush, she saw a gentleman who looked just like the person Rose had been disguised as the previous evening, except this gentleman had ropes bound around him and a cloth covering his mouth. He was also indecently covered in only his muslin shirt and knit-footed drawers. Face hot with embarrassment, she hurried to look away.

"I had no idea you were here," she heard Julian say. "I-I'm sorry, Francis. If I'd known this happened to you, I would have come out here last night."

"I didn't warn you that I was coming," Francis replied. "I was afraid something terrible was happening to you. You sounded like you

were in a panic in your missive."

"It's just like you to come when I say not to. But, it sure is good to see you. Here. Put on my coat. It'll cover most of you."

Willow waited until Julian told her it was safe to look before she allowed her gaze to go in their direction. Thankfully, Francis was covered enough to avoid making either one of them uncomfortable.

"Do you feel up to riding a horse, or should I get the carriage?" Julian asked.

"I can ride a horse," Francis told him. "It's not as bad as it looks. It was the strangest thing. I stepped out of the carriage for a couple of minutes, and the next thing I know, I was all tied up. I don't even know what happened. Your coachman and my carriage were gone, and I was here. It must have been thieves."

Julian glanced her way, and after a moment, he said, "Well, the important thing is you're all right and we found you."

"We?" Francis' gaze went in her direction, and he blinked in surprise.

"My wife," Julian said.

Francis' eyes grew wide, and then he laughed. "Don't tell me you didn't want me to come because you wished to be alone with a lady. You're a cad, Julian. Running off to elope without saying a word to me about it. I'm tempted to take your money out of the investments Lord Steinbeck told me about. You deserve to face financial ruin for scaring me the way you did." He patted Julian on the shoulder. "I'll forgive you this one time. But just this once. You can't do anything like this again." He turned and bowed to Willow. "Forgive me for ignoring you, my lady. You have no idea what I've been through on my way here. I imagined all sorts of terrible things. I wasn't even sure I'd see him again." He put his hand over his heart. "I can't tell you how relieved I am."

"I'll be relieved once we get you a warm bath, clothes, and a hot meal," Julian said. "I'm glad all of this happened in the summer. You would have been in serious danger if it was colder out at night."

"Yes, I do consider myself fortunate for that." After they got on Julian's horse, Francis added, "You have to tell me all about your wife. How did you meet her? When did you marry her? I didn't even know you were sharing a secret courtship with a lady. Now I'm beginning to wonder if you really went to Italy and Sweden."

"I did go to those countries, but I met Willow after I left London to come here."

Willow wondered if Julian would tell Francis about her coming from the future, the curse, and Rose, but it turned out Julian said he met her while on his way to the estate. While the version he was telling Francis was far less exciting than the truth, Willow thought it

was much more believable, and for that reason, it was the better version.

One Year Later
London

After getting ready for the ball that evening, Julian entered Willow's bedchamber, surprised to find that she still hadn't put on her gown. She was sitting in front of her vanity with their three-month-old son in her lap. Julian couldn't be sure, but it looked like she was trying to make Ordell's sleeping gown longer by trying to stretch it out.

"Francis and Kimberly are going to be here in a few minutes," Julian said. "You can fuss with Ordell's sleeping attire later."

She glanced up at him. "He kicks his blanket off at night. I'm afraid his feet will get cold. I didn't realize he was too big for this gown. We'll need to have more made."

"We will, but we can't do it tonight. Don't you have something to cover his feet?" He distinctly recalled Willow and Kimberly talking about baby clothes after Kimberly told them she was expecting a child.

Her eyes lit up. "I do!" She stood up and gave Ordell to him before she hurried to the small room off to the side of her bedchamber.

Ordell babbled as if he didn't understand why his mother insisted on fussing over his feet when his gown was thick enough for winter. And to think they were in the summer months! It was really no wonder that Ordell kicked the thick blanket off of him during the middle of the night.

Julian chuckled and rubbed his son's back. "I suppose you can't blame a mother for wanting to make sure her child has everything he needs."

It was certainly better than one who thought nothing of giving her child to an evil fairy. Though there had been no traces of magic, or Rose, over the past year, Julian still had nightmares from time to time that Rose had been successful in binding him and Willow. In some of those nightmares, he and Willow were trapped in Droch Leteacht's graveyard. In other nightmares, that dreadful fairy had thrown him and Willow out in order to keep Ordell.

It was always with great relief when he woke up and realized it had been a dream. He was glad he had decided not to tell Willow how dark and terrible that fairy's abode was. The two of them didn't need to have those nightmares. It was enough he was the one haunted with them from time to time. There were moments when he wondered if

the fairy had sent one of his captives to invade his mind in order to plague him with those nightmares, since that was one of the things evil fairies delighted in.

He'd never know if the nightmares were purely from his imagination or worse, but at least he knew those nightmares were just that: nightmares. He and his family would never be burdened with the reality of such an awful fate. The curse was over. He and Willow had made sure their children would be safe. The blue fairy would always be the owner of the land. And the green fairy was finally free.

Julian kissed the top of his son's head. "Yes, you're much better off with a mother who worries over every little thing than one who doesn't care about you at all."

Willow returned with a pair of knitted shoes. "I hope these will fit."

Julian turned their child so that the boy's feet were easier for her to put the little things on.

Willow slipped them on then tied them so they were secure. She didn't hide her relief. "They fit."

"I'll tuck him into his cradle while you finish getting ready for the ball," he told her.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" Willow asked.

"He'll be fine. I instructed the maid to check on him every half hour while we're gone, and I told her we'd be at Lord Clement's ball if she needs to send us a missive." When Ordell yawned, he added, "I doubt he'll be awake much longer. He'll probably be asleep almost the entire time we're gone."

"You're right. I need to rest and enjoy the evening." She took a deep breath and released it. "Lots of mothers have left their children and gone to balls, and everything has been fine."

"Everything will be fine." He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and kissed her. "We'll only be gone for two hours." He had chosen to keep their first evening at a ball short so that she wouldn't end up worrying for too long. He suspected as they had more children, she wouldn't worry so much, but that was all going to have to come in time. "I'll be back in a moment."

While she went to the vanity, he carried their son to the small room. The moonlight allowed plenty of light into the room so that the darkness was expelled. He gently put Ordell in the cradle that was lined with iron. He brought the blanket up to Ordell's waist, figuring it would keep the boy warm but not uncomfortably so. Ordell yawned again, and his eyes began to droop.

"You are going to be one very well-loved little boy," Julian whispered. He gave his son a kiss on the forehead then left the room.

Willow had put on the orange gown she'd recently purchased and

was styling her hair. “I’m sure Francis and Kimberly are already here. Why don’t you talk to them while I finish getting ready? I hate the idea of keeping them waiting.”

“All right.” He kissed her cheek. “I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you, too. I won’t be long. I promise.”

Glancing at his reflection in the mirror, he saw that his orange cravat needed to be adjusted and hurried to secure it in place.

Then he left the room and headed for the drawing room. As soon as he got there, he saw that Francis and Kimberly were on the settee.

“Don’t get up,” he told them. “Willow is still getting ready. She wanted to make sure Ordell will be warm through the night. It delayed her.”

“I meant to ask you about his name,” Kimberly began. “How did you and Willow pick it? Francis and I have been trying to figure out what to name our little one, but we’re having the most difficult time of it.”

“I keep telling you there’s plenty of time to pick a name,” Francis told her.

“I know, but I don’t want to put this off until we’re taken by surprise,” she said.

Francis laughed. “How can we be taken by surprise? It takes nine months to have a child. Considering you just discovered you were with child last week, I don’t see how you can be in such a hurry to come up with a name.”

“I like to be prepared,” she said. “Besides, it’s fun to think up names.”

“All right then. William if it’s a boy and Mary if it’s a girl,” Francis replied. “There. That settles it.”

She groaned. “It most certainly does not settle it. The name should mean something important to us. Willow said she and Julian chose Ordell because it had a special meaning to them. I was going to ask her what the meaning was when the carriage stopped in front of the shop we were going to. Then I forgot to ask her. Now that I remember to ask, I want to know.” She turned her attention to Julian. “How did you come up with it? It’s not a common name.”

“We wanted a name that meant ‘new beginnings’,” Julian said. “We both felt that when we met, we got a new beginning in life.”

“That’s lovely,” she replied.

“It is,” Francis said. “I can’t believe what a romantic you’ve turned into over the past year.” His gaze went to his wife. “I’m telling you, this is not the same gentleman who left London to bury his father. That gentleman didn’t want a lady standing in his way of traveling all over the world.”

“My cousin is right,” Julian admitted. “I’m not the same person I

was back then. I had a lot of time to think over what is important, and I concluded that being with the people one loves matters more than where one resides."

"And to think I tried to tell him that for years," Francis added with a shake of his head.

"At least I learned the lesson before it was too late." Julian noticed Willow coming into the room and rose to his feet. "I think we're ready to go now."

"We are," Willow said. "I'm sorry I took so long."

"We didn't mind waiting," Kimberly assured her as Francis helped her to her feet. "We were discussing baby names."

"Have you picked one already?" Willow asked.

"No, not yet, but maybe Francis and I will think of something special that signifies what we mean to each other," Kimberly replied.

"We have a book if you want ideas," Willow offered.

Francis nodded. "That's a good idea. We'll read the book and pick the name that fits our little boy or girl the best."

"I'll give you the book after we return from the ball," Julian said. "You can start looking through it while we have something light to eat and drink."

Julian extended his arm to Willow, and she put her hand on the crook of his arm. He took a moment to look at her and then looked at Francis and Kimberly. He could think of few gentlemen who were as fortunate as he was.

When he thought of how his life had been during those two very long centuries, it made him appreciate what he had all the more. He wasn't going to take a single day for granted. He was going to make the most of every moment. He smiled at his wife and friends as they left for the ball.

Chapter Thirty

Present Day
Thursday morning 8:00

Arnold Thompson parked the car in front of Nightingale Hall. There were seven cars parked out front that he didn't recognize. He didn't see Violet's van anywhere. He didn't understand it. Who would visit a young lady who was only temporarily here to sell an estate she'd inherited?

With a shrug, he gathered his briefcase and got out of his car. He rang the doorbell. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the pitter-patter of little feet from the other side of the door.

The door opened, and a boy who couldn't be older than six stared up at him. Before Arnold could speak, a man in servant apparel came to the doorway.

"Mr. Jack, you must not answer the door," the man told him. "You can't be sure who is on the other side. Now, return to your parents."

The boy glanced at Arnold, apologized, and then went down the hall.

The man turned to Arnold and offered him a smile. "I'm the butler. Forgive the lad. He's overwhelmed by the size of this place. Lord and Lady Blackwell tried to warn him the manor was much larger than what he's used to in London, but I don't know if anything can prepare a child for all of this. Are you Mr. Arnold Thompson?"

Arnold's eyebrows furrowed. "Yes, I am."

"Good. Please come in. We're expecting you."

Arnold took a tentative step into the entryway. "I'm at a loss on what to say." He scanned the entryway. It looked just like it did when he was here three days ago. "I'm supposed to see Miss Willow Knudson."

"I apologize, but I don't recognize the name."

Was it possible that Willow had left and this family came here? No, it couldn't be. The last person with the title Blackwell was Greg, and he was dead. There was no other Blackwell heir. He had made sure of it before he contacted Willow. Maybe there was a titled family who sounded close to Blackwell. It was possible he'd misunderstood the butler.

"Um, it's been a long past couple of days," Arnold said with an uncertain chuckle. "I've been going all over England to take care of wills for my clients. Did someone buy this estate from a young lady who lives in the United States?"

"No, there's been no sale of this estate. I served Lord Blackwell

until his death two weeks ago. His oldest son is now here to acquire the estate."

"That's not possible. Greg Westmore, the Earl of Blackwell, didn't have any living sons. The next of kin was Willow Knudson."

The butler's eyes grew wide. "I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Thompson. I've been employed here for thirty years. In that time, I served Warren Azazel for twenty-eight of those years. We just had his funeral. His eldest son Darren Azazel is now the earl of this estate. We thought you were here to preside over the reading of the will. We were expecting a lawyer at eight in the morning."

"I am a lawyer." He warded off the feeling that this was all a dream. He knew full well he was wide awake.

A man who appeared to be in his late thirties approached them. "My son said there's someone here."

"Yes, my lord," the butler said. "This is Mr. Arnold Thompson. Mr. Thompson, this is the gentleman I told you about. Darren Azazel, the Earl of Blackwell."

Darren Azazel turned to him and shook his hand. "Yes, we've been expecting you. Thank you for coming. We're in the sitting room."

Arnold couldn't come up with a single response as he followed the man down the hall and into a room filled with at least twenty people, some of which were children. A maid was currently going around the room to make sure everyone's teacups were full. A few women dabbed their eyes with handkerchiefs. They all wore somber colors and talked in low tones.

Arnold just could not believe what he was seeing. This could not be the same room he had been standing in just three days ago. It wasn't humanly possible.

"You can sit at the desk," Darren whispered and gestured to the piece of furniture that was under a portrait.

Arnold jerked in surprise and walked over to the painting to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. He was certain there had only been one person in it before. A young man in the prime of his life who had, a long time ago, been the earl of this estate.

"Julian Azazel," he whispered to himself. Yes, that was the name, and there had been that tragic rumor about his disappearance.

The man in the painting was the same man, only he was ten years older. And there were four children with him. If Arnold had to guess, they were nine and younger. Two boys and two girls. And also in that painting—

His eyes grew wide.

No, it couldn't be.

Arnold took out his handkerchief and rubbed his eyes. Then he directed his gaze back to the painting.

But it was! That was Willow! Sure, she was a bit older than he remembered, but it was definitely her.

How could this be?

"Mr. Thompson, is there something wrong?" Darren asked in a low voice.

Arnold turned his gaze to the man who was now the titled gentleman of this estate. He then scanned the others in the room who were all waiting for him to read the will.

He took a deep breath and put his briefcase on the desk. He didn't know what to expect when he opened it. He had brought the sales contract with him with a fresh batch of new pens for Willow to sign. He glanced at the painting. There was no way she was going to sign this today.

Still feeling overwhelmed, he opened the briefcase. To his shock, the document in it was the will of Warren Azazel.

Arnold took it out and sat in the chair. Yes, sitting was good. Too many surprises might make it difficult for him to keep standing.

He cleared his throat and turned to the first page of the will. He scanned the contents and then checked over the other pages. There were names mentioned that he wasn't familiar with. It was as if the entire family line had changed overnight.

There was no way this was humanly possible. There had to be some other force at work.

But what could that force be?

He took a moment to settle his nerves. A maid set a cup of tea next to him. He thanked her and took a sip. It helped. A little.

Once he felt like he could talk without his voice trembling, he began the reading of the will. The reading turned out to be smooth, despite the fact that he was still grasping to understand what was happening. He had a job to do after all, and he was getting paid to manage the distribution of the assets.

He noticed that the one thing the will specifically forbade was the selling of the estate. It was to be passed from one generation to another indefinitely. That seemed to be the only thing familiar to him. He recalled Greg and Greg's father being unable to sell the place. Come to think of it, Willow hadn't been able to sign the sales contract, either.

He was sure there was a connection between the change in that painting and the inability to sell the estate, but he doubted he'd ever figure out what that connection was.

After he finished what he had come there to do, he shook the people's hands and expressed his condolences. Then he left and went to his car.

He sat in the car for a good fifteen minutes before he was ready to

drive. Usually, he turned on the radio when he was alone, but today, he drove in silence. Somehow, listening to music didn't seem appropriate.

He took his time driving down the long driveway. He passed the tall shrubs. And then he came to the bridge. As he drove over it, a wave of blue light swept over him. He slammed the brakes and gave a quick look at his surroundings. He studied the moat and the shrubs behind him and the trees up ahead. But there was nothing unusual. Nothing to explain the strange blue light.

He put his hand over his heart.

What was happening to him? Was he losing his mind?

Wait. What had he come here for?

He put the car in park and thought hard for several long minutes. Something had slipped from his mind. He was sure of it. But for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what he had just forgotten.

He looked back at the estate. There was nothing unusual about it. It was a bright sunny day. Everything was green and well cared for. The poor grieving family had just laid the head of their family to rest.

Yes, yes, he recalled Warren Azazel now. He was a kind man. He loved being with his family. Not many men did. Arnold recalled that about him now that he thought about it. Warren had made sure to be fair with everyone in his will. He wanted to make sure his children and grandchildren knew he loved them very much.

Arnold relaxed. He'd only been brought here to do a simple reading of the will. That was all.

It was just another day at his job. He didn't know why he'd been so panicked back there. What Darren and the others must think of him.

Arnold chuckled. "You've watched one too many crazy movies. Your wife is right, Arnold. You need to spend more time in the real world."

When he got to town, he was going to let the people he worked with know he was going on holiday. He was going to finally take his wife on that trip she'd been wanting to go on for years. He put the car back into drive and turned the radio to his favorite music station. Then, whistling, he drove forward and passed the large trees that created a nice canopy above.

And they all lived happily ever after.

If you'd like to read tidbits that went into the writing of this book, keep reading. I added a special trivia section!

Trivia to go with An Earl In Time

The Cover

This cover was made by Locus Solus Cover Designs (https://www.locussoluscoverdesigns.com/). I found it through The Book Cover Designer where you can find pre-made covers. As soon as I saw the cover, I fell in love with it. I wanted to buy it right away, but I had no story to go with it.

I spent two weeks brainstorming different story ideas to go with it. Just by the layout of the cover, the story wasn't a typical historical romance. It had a supernatural element to it. That's how I decided it would involve time travel, and I was going to use the mirror in the cover to get one of the characters to pass from a contemporary setting to a historical one. Since the heroine's outfit was more modern looking, I picked her for the contemporary character. I chose the hero for the past. I decided she was going to be trapped onto an English estate that she recently inherited.

Since the woman on the cover can see her reflection and the man, I decided the heroine of this story would be able to see into the man's time. He, however, doesn't see his reflection in the mirror. He only sees her. So I figured the hero would only be able to see the heroine.

I did get a question from a friend about the fact that the man isn't wearing a cravat. I decided that the hero wasn't going to be formally dressing up after spending two centuries living out the same day. In my mind, the clothes reflected the emotional states of the two main characters. The hero felt empty and in despair. The heroine longed for a romantic relationship but wasn't aware of it until she meets the hero.

I'd say about half of this story was written to go with the cover. I don't typically write books that way, but it fit for this situation.

The Use of Colors

Early on, I decided colors were going to have a special meaning. Willow's color was red, and Julian's color was gold. This was based on the cover. After they married, their lives started to become entwined, hence the thread linking them together. At the end of the story, I had Willow wearing an orange gown and Julian wearing an orange cravat to symbolize the fact that they were fully connected in true love.

The villain's colors were purple and pink. I chose those colors because I was working on an art assignment for my kid's homeschool project. I really liked the way the purple and pink colors in this assignment looked together. Based on the two colors, I decided the villain would have a duel identity. In the contemporary time, one color was dominant, and in the historical time, the other color was dominant.

The fairies, of course, have their colors, too, and at the end when the blue wave passed over the lawyer, it was really there to reveal that the blue fairy was still the real owner of the land. Julian and Willow made good on their promise to let him keep the land for all generations. Also, the blue fairy was the reason Willow lost a great deal of her memories of the future and why the lawyer's memories were changed to line up with the new timeline.

Willow's wedding gown was blue. This was a gown the blue fairy had created just for her. In case anyone is wondering, Julian's mother never wore it.

The Names

Going into the story, my aim was to create a gothic feel to the romance. I didn't want a child's fairy tale. I wanted one meant for an adult. Naming the main characters was extremely important to me. I spent days getting the right names down.

Willow was one of the top names I found in my search for gothic names. Hers was easy.

Julian Azazel, however, took a total of two weeks to figure out. Julian was pretty easy. The name means "youthful", and I figured since he never aged for two centuries, it fit. The last name, however, was difficult. I went through a couple (one was Blackwell). When I realized Julian was cursed because his father stopped his uncle from marrying Rose, I ended up going with Azazel because that name means "scapegoat". Julian took the place of the baby she had intended to give the evil fairy.

Blackwell and Nightingale were names that popped up in my search for gothic names. Nightingale sounded more like an estate name, so I went with Nightingale Hall. That left Blackwell for the title.

Regarding the villain, I decided to go with the names of common

flowers since they went best with the colors that represent her. Violet was for the purple color, and Rose was for the pink color.

The Animals

In typical fashion for fairy tales, I thought it would be fun to add animals that had transformed into humans and vice versa. I knew early on that Violet's three men were under her control, but it wasn't until later in the story that I realized how she used them. In animal form, they had free will. As men, they didn't.

I thought long and hard over why they hated her so much. I came to the conclusion that she made them kill off the people in the family tree so that the title (Earl of Blackwell) was forced to go extinct. I made a reference to Greg's son dying. That was done by Violet who forced these men to do her bidding. This is why they were more than happy to help Willow get away from her and why they helped Julian get the wand.

The problem is that since they couldn't come out and tell Willow and Julian anything, I was never able to bring out the reason for their intense hatred of Violet in the course of the story.

The Ending

In the final scene between Julian and Willow, Julian thinks of the nightmares and wonders if they are sent from the evil fairy. They were. One of the slaves of the black fairy was sent to give him those nightmares. But Julian remained safe. Even though Julian and Willow weren't aware of it, the blue fairy continued to protect them. The nightmares were all the evil fairy could do to Julian.

According to Irish myths, fairies can come in and swap a baby with a changeling if there isn't some iron nearby to protect the baby. Because of this, Julian and Willow put iron around their children's cradles to make sure they were safe. After all these two went through, they wouldn't take any chances.

As for the lawyer, he and his wife had a wonderful vacation.

Usually, I write regular Regencies and historical western romances.

If you like the kind of books I typically write, you can join my email list to be notified as soon as my books come out by going to this link: https://ruthannnordinauthorblog.com/sign-up-for-email-list/

All Books by Ruth Ann Nordin
(Chronological Order)

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Marriage by Scandal Series
The Earl's Inconvenient Wife
A Most Unsuitable Earl
His Reluctant Lady
The Earl's Scandalous Wife

Marriage by Design Series
Breaking the Rules
Nobody's Fool
A Deceptive Wager

Standalone Regency
Her Counterfeit Husband (happens during A Most Unsuitable Earl)

Marriage by Deceit Series
The Earl's Secret Bargain
Love Lessons With the Duke
Ruined by the Earl
The Earl's Stolen Bride

Marriage by Arrangement Series
His Wicked Lady
Her Devilish Marquess
The Earl's Wallflower Bride

Marriage by Bargain Series
The Viscount's Runaway Bride
The Rake's Vow
Taming The Viscountess
If It Takes A Scandal

Marriage by Fate Series
The Reclusive Earl
Married In Haste
Make Believe Bride
The Perfect Duke
Kidnapping the Viscount

Marriage by Fairytale Series
The Marriage Contract
One Enchanted Evening
The Wedding Pact
Fairest of Them All
The Duke's Secluded Bride

Marriage by Necessity Series
A Perilous Marriage
The Cursed Earl – coming November 2021
Heiress of Misfortune – coming 2022

Fairytale Regency Romance
An Earl In Time

Historical Western Romances

Pioneer Series
Wagon Trail Bride
The Marriage Agreement
Groom For Hire
Forced Into Marriage

Nebraska Series
Her Heart's Desire
A Bride for Tom
A Husband for Margaret
Eye of the Beholder
The Wrong Husband
Shotgun Groom
To Have and To Hold
Forever Yours
His Redeeming Bride
Isaac's Decision

Misled Mail Order Brides Series
The Bride Price
The Rejected Groom
The Perfect Wife
The Imperfect Husband

Husbands for the Larson Sisters
Nelly's Mail Order Husband
Perfectly Matched

Suitable for Marriage – coming soon

Wyoming Series
The Outlaw's Bride
The Rancher's Bride
The Fugitive's Bride
The Loner's Bride – coming soon

Chance at Love Series
The Convenient Mail Order Bride
The Mistaken Mail Order Bride
The Accidental Mail Order Bride
The Bargain Mail Order Bride

Nebraska Prairie Series
The Purchased Bride
The Bride's Choice
Interview for a Wife – coming soon

South Dakota Series
Loving Eliza
Bid for a Bride
Bride of Second Chances

Montana Collection
Mitch's Win
Boaz's Wager
Patty's Gamble
Shane's Deal

Native American Romance Series
Restoring Hope
A Chance In Time
Brave Beginnings
Bound by Honor, Bound by Love

Virginia Series
An Unlikely Place for Love
The Cold Wife
An Inconvenient Marriage
Romancing Adrienne

Standalone Historical Western Romances
Falling In Love With Her Husband

Kent Ashton's Backstory
Catching Kent
His Convenient Wife
Meant To Be
The Mail Order Bride's Deception

Contemporary Romances

Omaha Series
With This Ring, I Thee Dread
What Nathan Wants
Just Good Friends

Across the Stars Series
Suddenly a Bride
Runaway Bride
His Abducted Bride

Standalone Contemporaries
Substitute Bride

Thrillers

Return of the Aliens (Christian End-Times Novel)
Late One Night (flash fiction)
The Very True Legends of Ol' Man Wickleberry and his Demise - Ink Slingers' Anthology

Fantasies

Enchanted Galaxy Series
A Royal Engagement
Royal Hearts
The Royal Pursuit
Royal Heiress

Nonfiction

Writing Tips Series
11 Tips for New Writers
The Emotionally Engaging Character
Writing for Passion

Where to Find Ruth

There are several ways you can find me! I'll list them below, and you can pick the one that most interests you.

My Monthly Blog (https://ruthannnordinnewsletter.com) Once a month, I'll give updates on books I'm working on, and I will include new release information.

My Author Blog (https://ruthannnordinauthorblog.com/) For anyone who would like to read my ramblings about books I'm working on, updates I'm making to books (such as new covers for boxsets), trivia about past books, and what my thoughts are in the writing and publishing world, this is the blog for you.

Keep updated on my new releases at these following sites:

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